

# PANTECHNICON

A miscellany of scientific fiction, whimsy and grotesque tales for Gentlemen and Ladies



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Blankenship & Dawes  
in

The Island of Ignominy!

Being an account of Mr. Blankenship and  
Mr. Dawes' exciting adventures upon a  
remote island

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Wherein supernatural terrors and  
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A discourse with the Master of Fear

Mr. Ramsey Campbell discusses his life and  
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Halliday and Mr. Paul Kane.



# PANTECHNICON

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My, what a lot of editorial!

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Centuries after a toxic atmosphere has confined Humanity to Earth, something wants to leave the planet.

To do that, it'll need the help of an Interpreter - one of the professionals who use the Rosetta drug to facilitate diplomacy.

Together, they'll change the world completely.

Luke Tudge

*The Dopple Gang Show - Part One*

Jacob Rieser's not going to get an insurance payout for the destruction of his flat. Apparently the Loss Adjuster doesn't believe his tale of parallel worlds, gorillas in armour, and a doppelganger who tried to kill him.

The first part in a new ongoing series.

Colin Sinclair

*Blakenship & Dawes in: The Island of Ignominy!*

Following the sinking of an ocean liner bound for South Afrika, Avery Dawes and James Blakenship find themselves stranded on an idyllic island.

Admittedly the island is dominated by an active volcano, the natives are mechanised spider-bodies with human heads, and the fellows in question are armed with naught but their wits and, well, their wits, but an English Gentleman must keep a stiff upper lip about him at all times.

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**You'll notice that** Pantechnicon is constantly evolving, being tweaked and polished from one issue to the next.

We'll try to keep the evolution to a slowish pace, but with three months between issues, a lot of change can happen. So what's happened with Issue Six?

Well, some of the content is moving to be solely available from the Pantechnicon website. From here on in the reviews will be there, online, waiting for you, and they'll be appearing a lot more regularly than once a quarter. That way we can get them to you while they're fresh and relevant.

London Calling has also gone website-content-only. Its purpose was always to allow us to hit that six-story target, but now that Pantechnicon's getting more hits, and being more widely read than ever, I'm happy to say that we're receiving more and more submissions, and can now hit target without, shall we say, "additional editorial contribution". Which is good, because this magazine is all about finding and publishing great new talent. The more room I can spare for that, the better.

We have other website content, too. Our podcast has finally been launched, and you can either listen online, or download for whatever nefarious purposes you wish to put it to. Available for all good RSS readers from <http://feeds.feedburner.com/Pancast>

Speaking of FeedBurner, there are two more Pantechnicon RSS feeds - One for the main site, and one for you to keep an eye on our forums without ever having to leave your favourite reader:

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/pantechnicon>

[http://feeds.feedburner.com/pantechnicon\\_forums](http://feeds.feedburner.com/pantechnicon_forums)

Finally, we have a new editor coming on board for the next issue; Alasdair Stuart joins the team. A freelance journalist, Alasdair has written for SFX, DeathRay, SciFiNow and Neo. He co-edits Hub Magazine with myself and Lee Harris. He not only creates and produces the Pantechnicon podcast (henceforth shall it be known as the PanCast), but also podcasts for Pseudopod and Escape Pod.

So here it is: Issue Six. We crave feedback, so if you love Pantechnicon (or if you loathe it) take a moment to stop by our forums, become a fan on Facebook, or email us at [Editors@pantechnicon.net](mailto:Editors@pantechnicon.net). Tell us what you want more of, what you want less of, and what (if anything) you'd like us to change altogether.

**Trudi Topham.**

## Editor

Trudi Topham

## Cover art

Trudi Topham

Source image © Tanguy de Saint Cyr - Fotolia.com

## Fiction

David Brookes, Quentin Mark Pierson,  
Jens Rushing, Colin Sinclair,  
Victoria Snelling, Luke Tudge

## Non-Fiction

Caroline Callaghan, Lee Medcalf, Tony Lee,  
Stephen Volk

## Web content

Jamie Halliday, Kevin Gilmartin, Lee Medcalf,  
Paul Kane, Alasdair Stuart

## With thanks to

Ramsey Campbell, Stephen Volk, and all our contributors

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# The Interpreter

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AUTHOR: Luke Tudge

A downward flick of the eyes, an aborted caress of the chin. These and a whole host of cues I'm not clearly aware of tell me that the series of rasps and gulps this man has just emitted mean 'we wish to call a recess'. Or words to that effect. I transfer this message to the Solipsist envoy in his own language, thankfully one whose pronunciation is a great deal easier on the throat, and he gives his assent with the universally understood sideward nod of the head.

Of course, there is a whole emotive subtext to the utterance as well. One which the sensitising narcotic Rosetta makes stupidly obvious to me, so much so that even after this many years on and off the drug I still find it hard to believe that non-users pick up on so little of it. But a good interpreter can filter this out and pass on explicit meaning only. It keeps at bay the diplomatic crisis that would ensue if we knew what people were *really* saying.

I can't be bothered going back through security for the recess; I am still sore from this morning's cavity search and I won't be allowed into either party's rest chamber, so I just wander around the audience room. A couple of the representatives from the Black City Mining Community stay behind as well. Hunched, pale and muscular, they look so homogenous I can't even tell if one of them is the man I was translating. Odd that you can become so acute to communicative acts without sharpening any other aspect of perception.

The Miners have their heads close together discussing something at the edge of audibility. Although Rosetta does most of the work of understanding for me, it helps to have some knowledge of the main language families, especially of common nouns, which can sometimes be ambiguous otherwise. Without really wanting to, I pick out a distinctive heavy gulp followed by three tongue clicks of increasing intensity, their word for 'woman', and realise that they are talking about me. I catch their suspicious stances and wait a few seconds before wandering as aimlessly as I can pretend to the other edge of the domed room. Expensively panelled with real wood and filled with

concentric rings of pews, the place has the feel of an old courtroom. A high skylight looks up into Earth's glowing toxic atmosphere. Diplomatic centres aren't normally so lavish but at my level I tend to work with the most generously-funded missions.

The Solipsist envoy strides briskly back into the room, and the remaining Miners file in from the opposite door. The Miners begin speaking almost immediately:

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The envoy looks over at me, eyebrows raised in contemptuous surprise, and I realise I'm not understanding a word. I quickly take out my snuff box and suck a pinch of powder up a nostril. I apologise in both languages and in New Mandarin for the centre's overseer. They recommence. It sounds the same, but this time I know they are saying:

- “We have reached a decision,” (the spokesman, who then turns to his comrades) “have we not?”

- “We have all.”

I pass this on to the envoy, more to confirm my understanding than to communicate anything, as his posture makes clear, to me at least, his total lack of interest. Oblivious, the Miners press on with a preamble. “We of the Mining Community are conscious always of the particular desires of foreign cultures, and so do not wish to waste a moment of your solitude, which we know to be precious to you. We shall, therefore, be brief. We have prepared a list of desired points of co-operation in combating the roach infestation problem in the border areas between our cities. We will now dictate this list to your dummy interpreter.”

I snort another pinchful of Rosetta and more or less switch off for the next half-hour as the drug does its work. Or rather my work. If I were



interested in politics I am sure the details of the discussion would be fascinating, but I am about as apathetic as they come. This is no accident; we interpreters are bred and trained for it, for a particular blend of narcissistic cynicism that ensures impartiality in matters that do not directly affect us, and gradually develops into the depressive taste for pathos that enables us to accept, even embrace, Rosetta's unpleasant side-effects.

I can feel its shape properly now. It's a sphere. A globe. Not quite a perfect one but slightly squashed. The two flatter ends are cold, and the bulge all around the middle is hot and wet. I am at my most dense, and consequently my most sensitive, in these tropical areas. In these and wherever the people live. Their cities represent for me pressure points of acute sensitivity. The only areas I know nothing about are those submerged in water. Where these are extensive I can relay information over them only slowly, by sending units aboard the mobile habitats the people use to transfer their goods. I can measure their shape by timing these voyages, but that is all.

Since I learned to read, however, I have begun to inform myself about those things I am not able to touch directly. The people's store of information, at least that part I have been able to lay my units on, is modest, but some things I do know. I know, for example, that at one point they had the power to leave the surface of the sphere, but lost this along with a great deal else after a catastrophe. The idea of leaving the surface came as quite a shock, accustomed as I had been to thinking in two dimensions, but apparently they left and were able to touch the surfaces of *other spheres*.

The catastrophe was some sort of toxic explosion. That much I know because, of course, I was there, although at a much more primitive stage in my development. Strangely, whatever devastated the people so terribly had little effect on me. In fact, it is since then that I have made my greatest discoveries. In terms of loss of units, I registered the event only at or very near the points of detonation, which were numerous but by my standards reasonably small. I noticed soon after the decimation of many of the cities and the abandonment of the rest. The event predates my literacy, alas, as I have since learned that most of the written records were destroyed in the blasts. It is clear, also, that their subsequent isolation from each other accounts for the profusion of different languages among them.

I leave the diplomatic centre in the deepening darkness, exhausted. This physical waning blends gradually into the despair that characterises a Rosetta comedown as I make my way through the tube system to my rented apartments. Normally it takes a couple of hours before I need to be

physically restrained, but considering my earlier slight lapse in dosage I am taking no chances. The drug is seeping out of me in a slow cold sweat and I can no longer read people. I feel totally isolated yet terribly aware of the crowd around me. I hurry out of the station.

The hustle of the walkways is worse than the tube, oppressively busy, and I have to be alone for my withdrawal. The language in this town is a remote cousin of my native Eurindian but sober I can make little out of the commuters' petty chatter. I hate them suddenly, and turn this hatred reflexively on myself. I hate what I do not understand. No, I hate more what does not understand *me*. And I hate this hate; my vanity, my arrogant, needful self.

The relief of reaching the apartments and privacy is momentary; my breathing feels to me dangerously rapid, everything is black and leering, and the beautiful antique furnishings seem a sickening, gaudy extravagance. On a pointlessly large oak table, piles of unfinished food cartons and an open, unread, story book bear scornful witness to my waste of a life. The burning, spice-hot tears of withdrawal are grating over my cheekbones to drop, steaming onto the carpet, as I cast around for some way of ending this bitterness, immediately. But in the end the best I can muster is to collapse where I stand, sobbing and clawing at my hateful, useless face with carefully trimmed fingernails. I only disinterestedly register the strong arms that take hold of me from behind.

I had suspected for a long time that the people must have a way of storing information other than in their individual memories, which are far too fragile to account for their seemingly informed behaviour. But it took me a long time to figure it out; their system is so different from my own, in which everything is encoded in the behaviour of the units. Once I began to hypothesise the existence of writing or something like it, it was still some centuries before I discovered where it was and how I could decipher it.

My problem is the opposite to that of the people. My collective behaviour is impeccably efficient, but my units are cripplingly primitive. When information has to be processed by large-scale interaction, interpreting something as small and inconsequential as a printed character is a painstaking task. In the end I was able to make use of the slight differences in odour and texture of those parts of a page that are covered in ink. By running many units over it in files, I can deduce the shape of the text from the minute changes these differences cause in the behaviour of



each file. From there it was less than a century before I grasped the distinction between 'pictures', which represent things in a universal fashion, and those odd symbols the people have invented for themselves as an arbitrary code, and to associate the one appropriately with the other.

In intermittent dreams I kill myself a hundred times over, knowing, somewhere through the delirium, that I will keep on waking, and drifting off to do it again. Most of my scenarios involve nature; mauled by wild animals, dropped into the Pacific to drown, often I throw myself from cliffs. Popular science has it that men succeed more often than women at suicide, because their chosen methods are more violent, more final. Perhaps I have taken their example to heart, sometimes blasting my head off with a big gun or leaping at tube trains. In waking life, however, I am a terrible physical coward. The few near misses I have had, escaping from my carer or coming down too early, I have headed straight for the medicine cabinet.

Waking from withdrawal despair is like growing up, an imperceptible process of change that slows but is never fully over. A day or so into the comedown you realise you've just stopped feeling so bad. Having been an interpreter for several years I no longer remember which point exactly on this levelling curve I used to occupy. I think I could feel better, a lot better, but I never get the chance to find out because after a week at the very most I'm back on Rosetta, which brings its own brand of well-being, that giddy, disdainful superiority.

Once fully conscious, I lie still strapped to the big four-poster while my carer measures certain physiological indicators, kept closely secret to prevent me from faking them. Once satisfied that I am safe, he unlocks the straps and lifts me to a sitting position by my arms, "Should I stay?" his New Mandarin is more or less limited to this phrase and to the platitudes he soothes me with during a crying fit.

"Thank you. Not today. I have a few things I need to do."

He seems to get the idea, walking tentatively over to the door

"Wait."

He stops and turns immediately.

"Um, I need to talk to a pharmacist. Could you call one?"

He looks at me blankly. I swing off the bed and pick up the picture cards from a low marble dresser, shuffling through until I find the one of a pharmacy. I hold it up and point to the telephone. He dials, waits a moment and touches a key to switch on the projector. "Thank you. You have been a great help."

He smiles at me sincerely before slipping out of the door.

"How may I help you?" the pharmacist smiles at me from the screen with teeth matching the white of her coat. "My goodness. Are you okay?"

I put a hand to my face and feel the raw burns and scratches. "Yes I'm fine, just a bit of a close call"

"You know you should always stick to your prescription." It doesn't take Rosetta to read the subtext here: *your fault, not ours*. She's too polite to make it explicit, but she knows that I use a black market supply as well. We all do.

"Yes, well I did, more or less. I might have made an error somewhere. Anyway, there was another problem. It might be related, I don't know."

"Yes?"

"I lost ability for a short while. In the middle of a diplomatic translation."

"What did you do?"

It would be awkward to tell her I had an extra stash on me. "It, er, just came back after a while."

"You probably have a slight bacterial infection. We'll send round some antibiotics with your next prescription."

"How would that affect me?"

"Rosetta isn't strictly speaking a drug, but a virus, one that invades and alters the cells of the brain. As a virus, it can attack all celled organisms, some more readily than others. Particular bacteria 'distract' the drug so that it attacks them instead of

you, depleting your dose.” She glances at the mess of my apartment, “And you should try to keep your home as clean as possible; insects carry the bacteria that most commonly interfere with the effects of retroviral drugs. We’ll send some bug powder as well. Is there anything else I can help you with? Perhaps some salve for your face?”

“No thanks, I have something already. See you later.” I wait a moment for her to disconnect then wander through to my dressing room. It’s dark outside and the dealers will be on the walkways by now. My wardrobe is elegant but colourless, overrun by black, the colour of formality; I’m usually either working or not in the mood to draw attention to myself. But traffickers are very attentive to fashion, so I pick out the Dark Ages gown I bought last week.

I consider having something to eat, but I can’t face it yet. Feeling slightly nauseous, I sweep the food cartons off the table into a bin, dislodging a pair of cockroaches. They scuttle over the table to the open book, where I notice to my disgust that there are scores of them crawling all over the pages. Do they eat the paper? Gross. I flick them off, trying to use only the tips of my fingers, then flip the book closed and leave the apartment.

My cognitive apparatus is ponderously slow when compared with that of a person. They think with a single organ, the brain, whose units are so close together that the diffusion of chemical signals takes a negligible amount of time, whereas the chemical signals my units leave in their faeces must wait to be physically found by others. So it is a few minutes before I am able to formulate the thought: ‘Damn you bitch, I was enjoying that!’

*Our Neural Chernobyl* by Bruce Sterling; there might be another copy somewhere. My units scurry off to spread this imperative to neighbouring apartments, across the city and ultimately around the globe.

“I have something important to tell you.”

“I’ll bet you do,” I say. The boy is obviously intoxicated on some of his own merchandise. He’s a handsome kid, though; blonde, pale, sharp-featured.

“The cockroaches know something you need to know,” he lurches at me, steadying himself on the neckline of my gown.

“Perhaps they’re trying to tell me I should get a

cleaner.”

“Don’t be funny,” he looks up at me, endearingly sincere.

“What happened to Kǎo Yā?” I ask him. I have dredged the last of my snuffbox getting high enough to be able to speak to people on the street and I can’t find my regular connection.

“Didn’t you hear? He died.”

“Poor guy. How?”

“He was coming down off a few days on Rosie. Had himself strapped down, but somebody untied him. Straight to the tube station and under a train.”

“Poor guy,” I repeat, “But he wasn’t a user, was he?”

“Maybe not. But he was definitely high when I saw him.”

The story seems suspect in some way, as does the boy. I want to ask more, but a more pressing impulse makes it to my mouth first, “Who else is dealing in this town? Do you have any?”

“How do you think I’m talking to you now, Eurotrash?”

“Oh I see. From your ranting and staggering I assumed you were on something else.”

“I’m a bit of a dilettante when it comes to drugs; a little of everything. Here, have a few hits on me,” he hands me a three small packs of powder, which I sniff at. “It’s Rosetta,” he assures me. I must admit it smells good for street quality, probably reasonably pure.

“Thanks very much,” I say, “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Seriously,” he smirks. “Just stay beautiful.”

He’s an idiot, but a good-looking idiot. I pause, but, not being able to think of anything to say in either a scathing or a flirtatious vein, I turn, wave and head home.



My second big surprise, after learning about space travel, was the realisation that the people are not aware of my existence. They are aware of my units, of course; these are so ubiquitous that they could hardly help but be, but they do not know about *me*. Although they inadvertently provide me with an abundance of fuel, they work diligently, if ineffectually, to drive me out of their apartments. I do not resent this antagonism, however, because, oddly enough, it has provided me with my most effective method of control over the people.

Most of the time the people pay me little or no attention, so accustomed have they become to my presence. As long as this is the case I can do little to influence their actions. When they are exterminating, however (usually by spraying poison, or by simply stomping or swatting), they temporarily adopt an intentional stance towards me. They think about where my units are likely to be and in what numbers, and they consider my possible reactions. In short, they treat me as if I were a conscious entity, and this leaves them open to subtle manipulations.

There are broadly two aspects of their behaviour I can influence, their mood and the objects held in their immediate awareness. Their mood I can influence with surprising precision, simply by controlling the level and nature of success they encounter in their efforts; hard won kills to increase their confidence and determination, for example. As far as the contents of their awareness are concerned, I am limited by the immediate environment. I can control their gaze by well-timed appearances at the periphery of their vision, sweeping it over the objects I wish to place at the back of their minds, and drawing it directly and repeatedly to those I wish them to notice more explicitly. By this method I can usually bring them to, say, open a book, prepare food or leave the apartment, shortly after the end of the extermination session.

When I return to the apartments, there is a delivery from the pharmacy in the dumbwaiter: my Rosetta prescription, antibiotic pills and bug powder. I have a job coming up tomorrow at the Nestlé tower, so I need to start gearing up already. I sniff up a pinch of the Rosetta before stashing it in my medicine purse, and then gulp down the antibiotics. Somehow I'm not inclined to deal with the roach problem right away; I want to shower, and perhaps watch the local news. I'm not sure whether this is particular to me, but whenever I'm high I feel the need to keep my linguistic abilities in regular use. I think it helps me to monitor my state, make sure I'm not getting low. I settle onto a chaise and switch on the television.

I haven't got the hang of television yet, maybe I never will. My units are sensitive to light, albeit at a very low resolution, so I

could in theory read the images; the problem is that they change too quickly. If the picture remains constant for a minute or so I can sometimes build a very general impression, a face here, a landscape there. Judging by what I can gather from other sources I'm not missing much. Mostly reviews of local affairs, which appear to be singularly uninformative.

Right. This is getting ridiculous. No sooner have I switched on than there are bugs crawling all over the screen. And for some flimsy, near-pornographic soap opera; the little fuckers have no taste. I take another dab from my prescription and drag myself to standing. If it's war they want, war they shall get. I unscrew the bug powder and dash a load across the television. The creatures lap it up like sherbet dip. I sprinkle a little across the carpet, some around the chaise, and a hatchwork of lines across the table. Take that. What's left I shake out vigorously onto the book where a few of them are still worrying at the binding. More scuttle out, from where I can't tell, and race to the areas I have dosed. Before long a full feeding frenzy is underway. I didn't know it was supposed to attract them. Well, as long as it kills the bastards I'm happy.

I sit back down slowly, taking care to brush the chaise for roaches. It shouldn't take long to work. Then suddenly I feel ill. Very ill. Nauseous, and my throat is on fire. My skin seems to have gone numb and when I reach up to touch my face I can't tell where my nose is, I knock into it with my hand. Within seconds I know that I am going to throw up. It takes me what feels like far too long to get my limbs to respond, but I manage to stagger to the bathroom in time to spray the contents of my guts, thankfully not much, in the general direction of the sink. With the relief this affords, I sidle over to the toilet and crouch down for the second wave, mostly bile and, I think, a little blood.

No, the blood is from my nose, I realise a little later as my trembling shakes a red drop into the bowl. Is something wrong with my prescription? I take the capsule out of my purse. The label reads: "Phenodihydrochloride benzelex, insecticide for household use. Do not use near small children or animals, except where extermination is intended. If ingested, seek medical attention immediately."

Oh shit.

The vehemence written in a thrown-down line of powder, the pattern dashed across the table. These and a whole host of

cues I'm not clearly aware of tell me that the series of impulsive actions the interpreter has just carried out mean 'I am lonely. Desperately lonely'. Or words to that effect.

Oh my. I feel strange. The units at the interpreter's apartment are spontaneously reorganising their marching patterns, and they are moving faster, with the strange consequence that signals are diffusing faster and with greater clarity. This altered behaviour too, is itself spreading outwards on the wave of information that reaches me about the interpreter, her lifestyle, her character, her desires. Should I put a stop to this? I probably don't have much time before the asynchrony either overtakes me or becomes too widespread to reabsorb. I resolve not to act. Something feels right, feels better, *clearer*.

My consciousness seems to skip leisurely from 'oh shit' to a hospital. At first I think I'm at home, as I'm strapped down and attached to a monitoring device, but then memory returns in one big dump. I suppose the hospital knew I was an interpreter and took the necessary precautions for a Rosetta comedown.

But I don't feel the despair. All that bug powder must have cleaned me out. There is a television at the end of the ward, and I can just about make out the dialogue. Sounds like one of the semitic languages, but I can't understand a word. Perhaps insect repellent has potential therapeutic applications; I'm sure at least some interpreters would agree that the vomiting, nosebleeds and hospitalisation are a small price to pay for an instant detox. But then again, I don't know how long I've been unconscious. It doesn't feel like long, but perhaps I've missed the Nestlé job.

Immobilised as I am, the best I can do is to take stock of my surroundings. The ward is long, rectangular and an unobtrusive sky blue in colour. There are several other beds but I appear to be alone. The television hangs at one end, and its moving images are the only thing by which you could distinguish the scene from a still picture. At the other end, closer to where I lie, a sliding door gives the only access.

This slides open discreetly and a muscular nurse steps in.

- C\*%&)X?

"What? Er, I feel okay, more or less." I indicate the machine by my side and the nurse moves round to

check my indicators.

- &&&/++\*+, she says, more to herself than me it seems, and pointedly performs a token check of my restraints. It would seem I'm not considered safe yet.

"Okay. Thanks."

This appears to be acknowledged. She smiles and takes a set of picture cards from a drawer under the bed. The card she holds up shows a picture of a figure in bed, over whom leans another, brandishing some sort of stylised object.

"A visitor? Okay. Thanks again."

She nods and exits, leaving the sliding door slightly open. A moment later, my visitor reveals himself. The boy I met on the walkways the other night. This is unexpected. Although on reflection I can't really think of anyone else it might have been.

"How do you feel?" An uninspired opener, but he appears sincere. He looks a little cleaner than when I last saw him, and I am surprised to find this dampens his allure somewhat.

"Alright, now," I say with a sigh and a shrug, caricaturing my own exhaustion in the way that we do in these situations. "What day is it?"

"Did the cockroaches tell you anything?" he asks, ignoring my question.

"Er, no. But I nearly killed myself trying to get rid of them. Perhaps that's a message of sorts." I'm not sure whether I want to be ironic or sincere with this last statement, so it comes out sounding a little awkward.

"You must have done something."

"Listen, you're a sweetheart, and it's very kind of you to come visit me, although I'm not sure how you found me, but-

"Just watch this," he says eagerly, producing a small black jar. He unscrews the lid and places it in my lap.

"No! No, no! Oh God that's disgusting, get it off!" I shriek as soon as I realise what he intends. Scores,



perhaps hundreds, of cockroaches spill out of the jar and onto the bed, where they swarm over my torso and onto my neck. Strapped down I can do no more than squirm and shout out for him to take them off. "Fuck! Fuck, get them off you little bastard, get them off me right now!"

"Just wait," he says calmly, watching the creatures that are now marching to the neck of my hospital gown and under, "it can feel quite nice if you try to forget about it."

Gross. But maybe he has a point. The all-over tickling I am getting from the tiny legs is not entirely unpleasant. Nor entirely without pattern. They are at my breasts and stomach now, and the attention they seem to be paying there feels almost purposeful, as if they were *trying* to touch me. And I haven't experienced that in a long time. This is crazy, but I close my eyes and, not try to relax, as that would be self-defeating, but allow myself to be relaxed. Relaxed by the sensation, by the benevolence somehow communicated in the totality of the movements of these tiny, repulsive creatures.

This pointillistic massage soothes me into what may be a trance, although I feel quite alert. Slowly, something more than just sensation makes itself felt. Some knowledge is intuitive, some is revealed. This feels like both. I am being told something by the action of the roaches, but it's nothing I'm not already sure of. I'm just being made aware of a previously intangible intuition.

"What are they saying?" The boy interrupts.

"They're saying," I concentrate, my body tensing, "they're saying..."

"Yes?"

"They're saying: 'We want to walk on the moon.'"

I can feel much more than its shape; I can feel its function. I have progressed from anatomy to physiology, so to speak. And from there to psychology. My units now come in all shapes and sizes, and their combined abilities will take us as a whole to the spheres. Our space program is under way, and language as a means of information diffusion is rapidly becoming obsolete. Variety is the spice of life, to be sure, but unity is its engine.

## The Ghost School Trilogy

**The genre franchise** has become a reputable form of exploitation cinema in every movie producing country, so perhaps it's no surprise that Korean filmmakers soon recognised the huge commercial potential of cycles, and jumped on the bandwagon. Though available separately and not packaged as a boxset (at least, not in the UK), the 'Ghost School' films do lend themselves to viewing as a series, sharing a number of common themes regardless of their vastly different filming styles and divergent plotlines, and the instalments are helmed by newcomers to features, ensuring fresh perspectives every time. These region 2 discs are released on the Tartan Asia Extreme label, with BBFC rated (15) certificates. All three movies are presented in anamorphic widescreen ratios, with a choice of Dolby digital DTS, 5.1 surround or 2.0 stereo soundtracks. The disc extras vary, but they all have printed inserts with notes by Justin Bowyer.

*"I hate going into an empty classroom. It's creepy."*

Whispering Corridors (aka: Yo-go-kuei-dam, 1998) is a low budget drama about teenage angst and death that's quite different to other notable school movies from around the world like Michael Lehmann's irreverent *Heathers* (1989), Argento's *Suspiria* (1977), and even Tae-gyun Kim's hyperkinetic action comedy, *Volcano High* (2001). The new term at an all-girls school begins with exams while the sulky students grumble at their misfortune orchestrated by strict discipline from teachers like abusive pervert Mr 'Mad Dog' Oh. However, alumni Miss Hur fosters goodwill and approves of harmony in class, but she cannot prevent the repetition of tragic events from nine years ago, when the disturbed Jin-ju (seemingly Hur's best friend) reportedly killed herself on the school premises.

Superb screenwriting allows the varied characters of 12th grade students to grow, along with the plot's build up of tensions. Moody star pupil Jung-sook lacks social graces, and is "possessed... by a study demon... with a low IQ." Talented yet tormented artist Ji-oh is banned from studies but secretly continues her painting in the now-disused room where Jin-ju died. Lonely Jae-yi is

AUTHOR: Tony Lee

a muted presence throughout. One of the curious things about *Whispering Corridors* is that it's shot entirely within the school grounds but, with all its emotional heartbreaks, intriguing revelations, nasty bullying, and low-key illusions, there's simply no time for scenes of teaching at all (and this film has received political criticism as a thinly veiled attack on South Korea's education system). The director, Ki-hyung Park, went on to make ESP thriller *Secret Tears* (aka: *Bimil*, 2000), and the disappointing *Acacia* (2003). Here, his choice of deliberately sombre lighting combines with the institutional colour scheme to deliver intense atmosphere and a claustrophobic edginess in almost every scene.

Yes, there's some poetic rough justice meted out toward the end, when the intimidating Mad Dog eventually gets his comeuppance, but this is a film with strong performances, tearful reflection and gnawing suspense, not a compendium of vivid shocks and dazzling effects work. Discoveries about the school's past are made, and an ominous mystery is solved, but sinister forces haunt the school corridors every day, and all night long, and there's no bright future to look forward to (even for the students who graduate to university). A dark red strain spreads across the homeroom ceiling, and another spirit-crushing tragedy looks to be inevitable before the blood drenched finale.

*"The first day a girl dies with her head emptied out."*

Written and directed by Tae-yong Kim and Kyudong Min, *Memento Mori* (aka: *Yo-go-kuei-dam 2*, 1999), is essentially a teenage lesbian romance. Hyo-shin and Shi-eun (Yeh-jin Park and Young-jin Lee) are falling in and out of love in class, but their sexuality disgusts classmates and worries some of the teachers. The two girls have created a joint diary full of poetry, artwork and intimate messages, and this book is stolen by the confused Min-ah (Min-sun Kim). Partly to avoid the bitchiness of other students, the girlfriends spend time larking about on the school's roof, but these scenes are quite different in nature to the rooftop games of juvenile machismo in Japanese school drama *Blue*



Spring (aka: Aoi haru, 2001). For the girls, the roof is a retreat from the outside world, not a place to prove anything to others and prepare for the rigours of adult life. However, all the schoolgirls' immature selfishness, bouts of hysterical giggling, pubescent anxieties (about hair, weight, height, flat chests, etc), and precocious philosophy, contrasts and distinguishes the first hour of Memento Mori from its final 30 minutes, when darker themes of revenge, suicide, and bloodletting are more prominent.

seen in the previous film, and a couple of the teachers here (like the apparently compassionate Mr Goh) tolerate rebellious attitudes and permit girls' self-expression during lessons. Of course, nothing is exactly as it appears. The lesbianism is tastefully, almost coyly, presented (perhaps the filmmakers sought to avoid state censorship?), with one big kissing scene, and the seduction of Min-ah (quiet sex play with an invisible-to-others ghost, or just a case of runaway erotic imagination?) in a noisy classroom, is really as explicit as this film gets. Fans of video smut are advised to look elsewhere.



When one of the girls is found dead in the playground it's assumed she fell off the roof. But did she jump or was she pushed? The girl evaded compulsory health checks. Was she pregnant? Betrayal, jealousy and guilt form the backbone of this drama, as wicked rumours spread through the school with viral efficiency, and further tragedies can be timetabled like choir practice. Visions of murder (including the classic image of the a severed head in a locker) could be the result of drug abuse, as there's talk of a homemade poison taken without obtainable antidote. Despite a somewhat elusive ghost, Memento Mori does have its share of big scares. The apparition that plays piano on stage in the darkened auditorium is likely to have your nape hairs prickled up, and there's pandemonium among the students during an electrical storm, when the lightning plays havoc with the school's lighting and mysteriously locks the main doors trapping everyone inside, as a spectral face looks down from the sky (a neat visual metaphor, whether it's supposed to be visible to all, or not). Even with two writer-directors, there's no evidence of creative wrangles here, and Memento Mori moves along without longueurs, and it's perfectly judged scenes never missing any poignant nuances of characterisation, while maintaining viewers' interest at every moment despite the fragmented narrative that weaves past and present in a stylishly novelistic fashion.

With its distinct lack of modern technology, Whispering Corridors might be viewed as being set in the past, but Memento Mori is resolutely contemporary with mobile phones, a Walkman, desktop computers (at least in the staff room), and a camcorder very much in evidence. The school itself is also generally a more pleasant - certainly less grim - place for learning than the establishment

The DVD extras include a routine making-of featurette with behind-the-scenes footage, a music video, and a bunch of trailers.

*"You need to practice till it kills you"*

Jae-yeon Yun's Wishing Stairs (aka: Yo-go-kuei-dam 3, 2000) revises the themes and styles of its predecessors but, in genre terms, it's certainly the

most conventional of these films. Having a female director onboard certainly brings out a different aspect, though, and this production has no male characters of note. The setting this time is a school for music and the arts, and the story is centred on ballet and sculpture classes. Jin-sung (Ji-hyo Song) and So-hee (Han-byeol Park) are the best of friends until their rivalry during the auditions for a single place at a prestigious Russian academy wrecks all trust and loyalty in the heat of a dancing contest. A victim of jealousy and resentment, one of the girls dies, heartbroken after a crippling fall, and her unforgiving spirit wants revenge.

The crux of the plot concerns a stone staircase outside the girls' dormitory where a magical extra step grants the deepest or darkest wishes of those who find it. Fat and lonely redhead Hae-ju (An Jo) wants to lose weight, urgently. With her neurotic attitude, monotonous snorting chatter, and clumsy behaviour, she's the obvious candidate for class clown, yet she becomes the most tragic figure of all these Ghost School films, when she learns that "desire is not enough" to succeed at anything worthwhile. Possessed by homicidal rage - depicted in uncanny dreams, blood showers, storm blackouts, and a crazy-eyed knifing - the spectral ballet dancer of *Wishing Stairs* exudes an omnipresent menace whether visible on screen, or a presence evoked by atmospheric suggestion, because she could be any of the students, driven by ambition and peer pressure to risk everything, including their humanity, for the contest. While it steals its best aesthetic values and visual motifs from brilliant Japanese terrors like *Ringu* (1998), *Wishing Stairs* is a remarkable, methodically constructed, chiller with much suspense and unease generated by whispering in the corridors as a dead girl is remembered. With a fourth drama, Ik-hwan Choe's

*Voice* (aka: *Yo-go-kuei-dam 4: Moksori*, 2005), already out, the future of Korean ghost-story cinema looks academic!

The bonus material on this disc includes: *First Position* - an interview with dance instructor Jung-hee Moon, *Fitting In* - revealing the extensive makeup effects (the first such use in Korean cinema) that changed actress An Jo into the portly Hae-ju, *Sketching Stairs* - shows full contents of a diary of cartoons that is only glimpsed in the film. There's also a featurette about the unique music score, and a batch of Tartan label trailers.





## The Dopple Gang Show Part One

**His left hand still hurt bad** from when the gorilla stepped on it. Jake didn't think it was broken, but under the rough bandaging job he'd managed that morning his skin had begun to itch. A creepy crawly tingling feeling that just would not quit. Jake was wriggling in his chair, hunting around various pockets for a pen when the Insurance Adjuster said:

"You contacted the local police, of course?" This guy's name was Edgar Franklin, spelled out in thin black letters on a silver name plate on his desk.

Jake stopped, one hand still jammed inside his jacket. "Yessir. I called them straight away."

"What exactly was their response, Mister..." Edgar Franklin bowed his head, shuffled a few papers back and forth. He tapped a finger slowly. "Ah yes. Jacob Rieser. How did the authorities react, Mister Rieser?"

Jake muttered something and straightened his tie.

"I'm sorry?" said Franklin.

"They laughed," Jake said. "First they laughed at me and then they slammed down the 'phone."

"I see," said Franklin. He gathered several photocopied pages together into a neat pile.

The office was small, cramped, too warm, an anonymous grey space in a tall, downtown building. Beyond the narrow, grimy windows, a drab cityscape did its best to block out all trace of natural light. Somewhere down below, traffic noise ebbed and flowed amid the rumbles and shouts of typical street life. It was all so very far away.

"I'm not making this up-" said Jake.

"I merely assemble the facts, Mister Rieser. Consider all the available information and determine if the company can honour your policy."

AUTHOR: Colin Sinclair

"Is there a problem with my claim?" said Jake.

Franklin sat quietly for several minutes and then sighed. "Okay, Mister Rieser," he said. "Let's start at the beginning and you can talk me through exactly what happened. I want to be sure that I understand every little detail."

"Okay," Jake nodded. "I was holding a gun-"

Franklin checked his notes. "You had a gun. Is that a licensed firearm?"

"No," said Jake. "I mean. The other one. The different me. He was the one had the gun."

"I see," said Franklin.

"I was armed with a sack of groceries and stick of celery," said Jake.

"I see," said Franklin. A few checks in boxes. "Do go on."

So I walked into my apartment and found myself, just standing there in the centre of the lounge. Same face, these eyes, different clothes, hair a little longer and rougher.

I was pointing a gun at me. A stubby, dull, grey lump of a thing. A few slow blinking lights down the side. Very science fiction. I thought I should say something. Dive for cover. Demand answers. Scream. Do anything.

A gorilla phased through the wall right then, yeah. So I was distracted.

Franklin interrupted. "Was there any visible reaction from the... other... you?"

"No time," said Jake. "This gorilla smashed him across the room and just leapt after, arms flailing wildly. That's when my couch went through the aquarium. There was a whole fountain of multi-coloured fish splattering up against the walls and across the ceiling." Jake waved his hands about to help demonstrate the extent of the damage.

Franklin ticked another box on one of the papers. "And when you say 'gorilla', I take it you mean some sort of hooligan? A burly criminal type?"

Jake shook his head. "No. This isn't a metaphor. I'm not talking film-noir heavy. It was your actual living, breathing gorilla."

"How could you tell?"

"I don't understand-"

"You say the gorilla was masked or hooded, yes? Wore some kind of all-over suit. How were you able to determine what it was?"

"It looked like a gorilla, is all. Comfortable on all fours, yeah? High shoulders and massive fists. Incredible reach."

"I see," said Franklin. Another box. Another tick. "Do go on."

-

The gorilla was armoured in segmented black, with a sleek padded suit half concealed underneath the interlocking plates, and it wore a huge motorcycle-rider helmet with a tinted visor.

So, this gorilla grabbed him by the throat, shook him up and down a few times like a maraca. The guy, intruder me, he's kicking out and thrashing, trying for a solid hit. Stuck his foot through the widescreen television right about then. I remember hearing the soft, implosive crunch and seeing a delicate fizz of sparks. Over the grunting and thrashing I mean.

I reckon the gorilla would have twisted the guy's head straight off if The Lady hadn't stopped him.

-

More scratching and shuffling from Franklin.

Jake waited.

"The Lady in White," Franklin muttered, tapping a pen against his teeth.

"I mentioned her already," said Rieser. "On the insurance claim form. Section B."

"Oh, don't mind me," said Franklin. "I'm merely fixing things in my head. Proceed."

-

I hadn't really moved at this point, but I turned my head to watch as The Lady stepped lightly into the room. She was dressed in the purest white I ever saw. Great material for a washing powder commercial. Her outfit was all over sleek and tight, though she was messing up the curves and angles with a bunch of zips, patches, pockets and what-not. A whole utility belt and braces scene.

It reminded me of something, but I didn't immediately figure out what it was; I was just looking at her. The way she moved through the space, the pristine planes and surfaces of her outfit, how the faint glow that shimmered on-

She was speaking to me.

Whatever she said first was muffled by the gas-mask she was wearing. Don't get the wrong idea, even that wasn't some clunky military artefact. Not at all, this was full-face respirator couture. Stylish, elegant, a beautiful marriage of form and function. I expect it to be big next season.

Whatever she said, gorilla got the picture and cooled down. One vast hand still pinning me to the floor.

The other me I mean.

When she took off the mask I was half expecting that movie moment, you know? The soft-focus cliché when the frumpy drab of a librarian shakes out her lustrous golden locks and turns into a really hot swan.



She looked kind of ordinary though. Aside from the pale skin and the lack of hair, I mean. She had a barcode tattoo above her left ear. "Sorry for your inconvenience," she announced brightly. Her voice was sharp, clear, accentless. "Grills here is good for grudge work but, personally, I am all about the finesse."

The Lady walked away before I could manage even a squeak. Went over to stand alongside the gorilla, patting one of those blocky shoulders. She produced a thin metal wand from her belt and started waving it at the subdued me. The wand whirred for a bit and the swirls of tiny red lights began to flash an elaborate sequence.

"That's our boy," she said. "Tag him and twitch him, Grills, I gotta deal with the regulations."

"Who," I managed. "What? You-"

The Lady turned and smiled.

"We're the Dopple Gang," she said.

Grills unhooked what looked like a giant size tape dispenser from a backpack, and began binding the other me from head to feet in a wide strip of clear plastic.

The Lady started to explain.

Alternate realms. An interconnected webwork of cause, effect, inference, implication. Places for everything and everyone stays in their place if they know what's smart.

People is people, though, so renegades and fools are forever making a break across the realties, looking for their other selves, hunting easy scores; searching for a better life.

"And that's where we came in," she says. "Border Patrol."

-

Franklin was staring now. It was making Jake feel uncomfortable. "It's just what she said," Jake offered.

"For every choice there is an alternative option, a different possibility, a positive or negative

outcome," said Franklin, reading aloud. "And these altered Earths apparently ripple out across the fabric of space/time and journeying between them is possible, with the right equipment, the right attitude, or maybe just some really bad luck?"

"You're taking it much better than I did," said Jake.

-

"Can you give me an example," I said. "I mean, sure, I get the basic concept, but what kind of choices can be made, what kind of change happens as a result?"

The Lady thought about for a while, then glanced down. I looked. Her feet were shod in ankle-high lace up boots. White like snow drifting on lofty mountain passes.

"Can you even begin to imagine what the world would be like if Clever Clogs had never been invented?"

I just kept staring at her until she said:

"Oh, right. You don't have these. My mistake."

"What are they?" I said.

She pointed at her boots. "Automagic reflexology enhanced footwear. Scientifically proven and guaranteed to improve intelligence, energy levels and general well-being. Clever Clogs - Bringing you a better world. One step at a time."

"Is that true?" I said.

"Or your money back," said The Lady. "Offer void where prohibited by law."

She started making ready to go. Grills was already dragging their mummified prey back towards the wall, heavy boots leaving deep gashes in the wooden floor.

"My landlord is going to go ape when he sees this," I said. Grills paused. "No offence."

The Lady handed me a slim sheet of paper. "Present this to Nexus-Centre within three months and we can take care of damages."

"Nexus-Centre?" I said.

"Border Patrol HQ."

"Where's that?"

"Earth. 7-1-2. Juncture 18. You can't miss us." She started attaching a cable to the prisoner.

"How do I get there?"

"Hop, skip and jump usually works, " The Lady stopped. "Dimensional Converter. You'll also need a Day Pass."

"How do I-"

"You apply. At Nexus-Centre. Here's a form."

"So to get to this Nexus I first have to go there and obtain a device to take me?"

"Exactly right," she said.

"But," I waved the sheets. "That's just ludicrous bureaucratic insanity."

"Yes," said The Lady, putting her mask back on and taking the strain on the cable. "Yes, I suppose it is."

-

"That was when they vanished," said Jake. "I've explained all of this several times."

Franklin gathered all his documents together and placed them in a slim, buff folder. "Would you mind waiting outside whilst I consult with a senior colleague? Well make a decision on your claim as soon as we can."

That was the beginning of the end.

Jake got back to his apartment about three hours later. He'd been waiting in the outer office for about forty minutes before Franklin had called him back, explained the situation, regretted to inform him...

Jake had it in writing as well. He'd read the letter several times on the subway home and it still wasn't getting any better.

We regret to inform you that we're going to keep your insurance money because we reckon you're some kind of nut job who, if not a danger to himself and others, is at the very least a danger to our grotesque profit margins. Yours, greedy and emotion-free... Obviously Jake was paraphrasing. It didn't make him feel any better.

He dropped his keys twice before he managed to turn them in the lock and get back into the damp shambles that used to be his neat, comfortable home.

The wreckage had not spontaneously healed itself. The rugs were still soft and squishy underfoot. There was much more water than had been in the aquarium, so Jake had begun to suspect some kind of as yet undiscovered fracture or slow leak in the pipe work beyond the mangled plaster of the wall over by what used to be the television.

There was a note, soaked through, from the landlord. A complaint about the noise of partying. A reminder of the building rules on keeping pets.

The heating was broken, which was a blessing. A winter sky was darkening above the city, and the chill in the air would at least keep down the scent of dead fish until he'd managed to find them all and dispose of the corpses.

Jake dropped to his knees and began hammering the floor with one hand, screaming until he ran out of breath. It was most unsatisfactory as an outpouring of rage. The damp carpeting responded with a distracting wet thud every time his fist slammed down. He was splattered with droplets of dirty, gritty water.

Eventually Jake stopped. Too tired. Too angry. Too icky. He sank forward until his head pressed against the tangled, sodden bulk of that hearth rug his sister had bought him last Christmas. That just made his hair wet. Jake started to struggle back up, caught a glimpse of a stranded fish-body, abandoned on the floor under the DVD rack by the window. Smooth grey curves. Blinking lights.

No. He would have remembered buying a fish like that.

Jake shuffled over in that direction, and only

managed to slide his hand under the shelving unit after he'd stretched out flat on the swampy floor. He got three fingers around the edge of whatever it was and teased it out into the open.

It was a weapon.

Jake knew that straight away. He was no expert in high technology armament; not a lot of call for it in his job at Stationary Services. He knew it was a weapon. It was slim, subtle. The narrow grip seemed to mould to the shape of his hand and the whole thing had a definite, inherent pointability that was simply irresistible.

There were a few coloured dots that glowed randomly. Nothing to suggest a trigger.

There was no sound. One end of the breakfast bar and the toaster oven simply vanished in a sudden nimbus of blue and gold light.

Jake dropped the weapon in shock and stepped back. Way back. Standing up against the wall. Staying safe.

Everything to the right of the sink unit was gone. There was enough space to simply step straight through to the kitchen area.

Jake thought about it for a long time before moving closer. Not too close.

There was no heat. The edges of the hole were perfectly smooth. Jake breathed deeply and clambered through the gap.

Once in the kitchen, he leaned against the refrigerator. The Disintegrator pistol... Jake already felt comfortable calling it that... the D-pistol lay out there on floor. Just waiting. Loitering at the edge of a world of possibilities.

Jake smiled.



# The Fandom Menace

*This column originally appeared in Pantechicon online in December 2007.*

## When you wish upon a star...

So 'tis the season and all that, when we're told that wishes come true and depending on whether you've been bad or good some fat bloke will appear in your house who hasn't been sent by the bailiffs and he'll drop some gifts around... All lovely in principal but frankly as an SF fan I'm fed up hoping wishes will come true, and I'm fairly sure that fat bloke is on a national register somewhere too.

Why the cynicism? Well apart from it being "my shtick" so to speak, I'm very aware that as an SF lover, getting your wish invariably ends up making you feel like you went to a party, saw the most amazing person at that party, only to wake up with him or her the next morning and realise you've just pulled John Merrick, with the personality of Glenn Close from Fatal Attraction - minus all the good bits.

You see, we as fans always want things to go on, be it more sequels, spin-offs or having a cancelled show resurrected. But I'm starting to feel like Rowdy Roddy Piper in They Live or Kevin McCarthy in Invasion of the Body Snatchers screaming at passing cars "Can't you SEE!?" because wishing for something to go on or come back seems to be the kiss of death for anything when we finally get our wish.

Take a look at the evidence: it's all around us. From the heady, deluded and idealistic 60's when Star Trek fans campaigned to get the show back for a third season and were rewarded with some of the worst episodes the franchise ever produced (yes even including Voyager!). Through to Futurama, where Bender's Big Score manages to drum up excitement but, in all honesty, never ever delivers more than a bunch of ill-timed jokes and bitter, petty snipes at the studio that cancelled the show in the first place.

Every franchise has had this Frankenstein moment of being brought back to life only to be shunned by its creator and the general public before

AUTHOR: Lee Medcalf

it's even taken a few faltering steps.

If we're honest it's our fault, as fans of the shows and franchises are to blame for this. It seems that for fans of all things forward thinking and futuristic we are the most staid and at times closed-minded bunch; seemingly unable to let go of the past, clinging on to old favourites like some kind of security blanket. A show gets canned or a film series ends and before the final credits have rolled there's an internet campaign to get it renewed. Then of course the inevitable happens: the show or movie series comes back and highlights with almost painful clarity the very reason the thing was cancelled in the first place, and the predictable fan backlash occurs causing the show to get canned for a second time. Then some bizarre temporal paradox occurs and fans demand the show's reinstatement again seemingly without irony or self awareness that this has happened once already and they hated it last time. The studios stick their fingers in their ears and go "La la la la we're not listening to you schizophrenic idiots" and the internet explodes with indignation at the senseless cancelling of a "classic" by SF haters in the studio system.

My personal favourite example of this is Firefly (which I've previously mentioned in this very column before): it's cancelled, the fans come up in arms about it, the DVD sells well and a film is made but all the indignant fans who demanded the resurrection fail to show at the cinema to financially help the series restart and so it lapses back in to limbo, while those same hidden fans scream at the top of their internet lungs with woe as Joss Whedon announces that Universal isn't going any further with the show due to the film's poor performance.

On the other side of the coin we have the cry of fans that get their wish and wish they hadn't. Oh how we all clapped for joy as the news we all hoped to hear for twenty-odd years was confirmed. New Star Wars movies! Yay! Two years later and half the planet wanted George Lucas and Jar Jar Binks burnt at the stake. Now some ten years on, the

world that had screamed and demanded Star Wars' return sit anonymously behind keyboards like mine (except mine isn't laminated in angry spittle, Doritos, and cans of Sprite) and bemoan the fact that Lucas took our demands for more and gave us what we supposedly wanted, until it started costing us a small mortgage in merchandise and didn't give us the same tingle of excitement we had at the age of eight.

So what to do? Well in short there's little we can do. Except perhaps just accept that if something ends it's actually a good thing! Darwinism in action, survival of the fittest and all that, because in the end if we as fans keep the old guard continually coming back for another lacklustre round (Yes, Star Trek and Doctor Who, I'm specifically looking at you two!) then the bright young things that will form the franchises of the future for our young nerdlings to get uptight about will never happen. And I don't know about you but the thought of a world where the be-all and end-all of modern SF in the year 2107 is two TV shows born in the early 1960's and a film franchise born in the 1970's is both too dull and too frightening to comprehend.

So beware, fair reader, be careful what you wish for: you might just get it.

*Lee Medcalf is currently campaigning for the return of The Clangers, The Flumps and Fingerbobs though he has already written 100 letters of indignation demanding their cancellation in preparation for them being crap upon their return.*

# Blakenship & Dawes in The Island of Ignominy!

**Avery Dawes** regarded the open sky. It was easy to do so, as he sprawled full on his back, without inclination or necessity to rise. The soft sand warmed him, the sighing waves teased his toes, and from time to time waving palm fronds infringed upon his field of vision. He contemplated the feathery clouds as they passed.

"I say," he said to no one in particular, "it's a far cry from Pall Mall, isn't it?"

The waves wet his knees, his elbows, and finally tossed his fair curls. "That'll be the tide, I suppose." Avery sat up, dripping with seawater. The events of the past day and night still fogged his mind.

En route to South Africa, set to arrive 12 October, 187-, on the good liner *Boravia*. The ship had sunk, of course, and there had been an awful lot of screaming. The boiler had blown – what a great explosion that was! – and the sea came rushing in. A mad rush for the boats, and Dawes had surrendered his seat to a fine lady, the young Miss Gerhardt of Mayfair. He'd have to call on her when he got back to London...

Having surrendered his seat, all Avery could do was swim for it, so swim he did, until his muscles burned with fatigue and every crashing wave was certain to do him in. But as each one bore him under, his ferocious desire to live compelled him to fight back to the surface and struggle onward, until finally he felt the blessed earth beneath his feet. And then sleep.

The first difficulty, then, was to reach South Africa, so his holiday might not be ruined. Avery took stock of his situation. He seemed to be on a beach of some kind, very fine in its way, with white sand and graceful trees dropping coconuts everywhere, but not a pub in sight, let alone a decent gentlemen's club. The jungle rose in a series of inhospitable mountains, the highest topped with snow. A thin trail of smoke lofted from one mountain, suggesting vulcanism. Avery calculated his position. The ship had gone down five days

AUTHOR: Jens Rushing

from Cape Town, so that put him... His command of geography was lacking. He supposed that he was somewhere between England and Africa, very near to or perhaps in the ocean itself. Yes, he concluded, I am definitely near the ocean.

Avery stumbled to his feet, ignoring his groaning muscles. He had cast off his jacket long ago, and his shirt had been frightfully torn in the struggle to escape the sinking steamer, so he dispensed with it entirely. The sun felt good on his skin. Avery was tall and well-muscled, possessed of a superb regularity of features, a high brow, an open and honest face, and blonde hair worn rather long. The sum of these assets was astounding and almost overpowering handsomeness; he was an Adonis inexplicably manumitted by Persephone. Not that he flaunted it – among his many virtues was a certain strain of humility.

But there lurked within his robust frame and vivacious step a primordial energy, a savage power, quite unevolved, that complemented rather than countered his refinement. One could detect this quality perhaps in the slightly prognathous jaw, or in the large, powerful hands, more fitted to wielding an obsidian-edged club than a brandy snifter.

He started down the beach, enjoying the sand between his toes. The gulls cried overhead and a seaborne breeze cooled him.

Before long Avery spotted a man on the shore. He seemed to be working intently on something. "Hail and well met!" Avery bellowed as he approached. The fellow looked up, annoyed at the interruption.

"Yes, hullo," he mumbled, and returned to his work. He was stitching a large square of canvas with a fishbone needle.

"The moniker's Dawes, Avery Dawes."



“James Blankenship. You’re standing in my light.”

“Apologies. I didn’t know it was yours.” Avery stepped aside. “What’re you working on? If you don’t mind the inquiry.”

James looked up from his work, annoyed again. “Wait one minute and you’ll see. I’m almost finished.”

“You could tell me. I’m a smart lad.”

“Yes, no doubt,” James said, his attention focused on the canvas again. “Yet I find a demonstration ninety to one hundred percent more efficacious than explanation. My father might say I owe that to my bourgeois love of the *mélodrame*. And by not explaining, I conserve saliva, which should be a top priority when we have no immediate water source.”

“By Jove, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No one ever does.”

“I say, old boy, weren’t you on the boat? I believe I saw you at bridge one evening.”

“I was playing whist. I find the element of so-called luck in bridge odious. Whist is a far more scientific pastime, a game of skill and recall rather than mere chance.”

“Ah, that’s why I prefer *vingt-et-un*. You never know what the dealer will turn over.”

“Actually, it’s quite possible to know what the dealer will turn over. There’s a great capacity for card-counting in that game. And as I enjoy the number itself, I am able to draw some amusement from an otherwise unstimulating game.”

“The number itself?”

“Certainly. Twenty-one a Fibonacci number, a composite number, a triangular number, and an octagonal number. It has great algebraic symmetry. It is three times seven, both figures infinitely treasured in numerological lore. And, call me simple, but the combination and recombination of integers appeals to an admittedly primal part of my personality, as the most elementary application of the sanctified art of mathematics and the laws governing structure and change.”

“So much for conserving saliva,” Avery said. “So you’re a mathematician, then?”

James snorted. “Perish the thought. I dabble.”

“Then, if you don’t mind me asking, why were you en route to Cape Town? I was bound for the shooting. I intend to return to England with the grandest tusks ever seen, and a lion-skin rug to match.”

“For my health. I’ve not the most robust composition, and my steady Hippocrates thought the climate would favor me. I was also intent on observing and cataloguing the megafauna.” James adjusted his wire-frame spectacles. “Coincidentally the same creatures you are intent on exterminating.”

“A naturalist, too?”

“Just another outlet for my unfortunate tendency to dilettantism, I’m afraid. Lo, the work is finished. The brothers Montgolfier might scoff, but circumstances constrained my artistry.”

James stood up. He was young, about Avery’s age, and shorter than Avery, though hardly diminutive. While Avery’s appearance conjured that of a Greek demigod, James was darker, with a brow often furrowed in thought, and brown hair, with lanky bangs falling over his forehead. He was slight of frame, and of a pallor bordering on sickly, though this added somewhat to his unique, almost Byronic charisma.

“But what is it?” Avery peered at the contraption. A jumble of cloth and twine draped over another jumble of springs and wires. Among the wires was a wooden box with a lens on one side, as well as a slim metal tube that Avery recognized as a Bunsen burner, connected to a small tank. “Where did you get that?”

“I always carry one with me, in case I need to reduce or sterilize anything. But patience – all will be made clear presently.” James patted his pockets. “What I don’t seem to have is a match.”

“Allow me.” Avery took a small waterproof canister from his pocket. “It’s for trekking. It would never do to have unlit cheroots whilst in the bush.”

"Of course. Stand back." James bent over his device and touched a lit match to the burner. A blue flame sprang up. James took the cloth and stretched it above the burner, and Avery realized what it was: a miniature hot air balloon. The envelope gradually took shape.

"A boat cover provided the canvas," James explained. He frowned. "It's hardly perfect. The shape can only be described as 'ovoid'. I was shooting for a proper tapered sphere. Ah, well."

Though the shape was indeed ungainly, it held air. Besides, the workmanship of the lines was graceful, and Avery said as much.

"Yes, well, thank you," James said. The envelope was now taut and straining to lift off.

"And what have we here?" Avery indicated the strange wooden box that served as the sole freight of the balloon.

"Ah, patience, my good man!" He pushed a small button on the box, and a whirring sound, as of a spring winding down, issued from it. James coaxed the balloon upward, nudging it softly, and it floated gracefully into the sky. "Oh, that I had wings like a dove, for then I would fly away, and be at rest," he said. "Psalms."

"By Gad, I say unto ye, that's bloody brilliant!" Avery cried, his fist in the air. "Avery Dawes," he added.

James laughed. "A modern Seneca. I advise you not to be too free with those epigrams – they're worth their weight in gold." Avery bowed modestly.

"Congratulations on your success," he said, watching the balloon dwindle above. "But how does this help us?"

James held up a finger, signaling patience. At that instant Avery held a distant pop; the balloon had exploded and the freight was hurtling earthward.

"It was designed to destroy itself after serving its purpose," James said. "Be so kind as to catch that. Gently, please."

Avery obliged, intercepting it in an agile dive, as if it were a rugby ball. He returned the box to James.

"In the confusion of the sinking, I had time to grab one possession, and this was the first I laid hands on. It's a miniature camera and darkroom all in one, thankfully packed in a watertight case. It has prepared plates, and the spring you heard was a timer, after the winding-down of which it shoots every plate in quick succession. Then a capsule containing an emulsion of hydroquinone is broken, and the development process begins. Tell me, Mr. Dawes, do you know 'The Lass That Loves a Sailor'?"

"I certainly do."

"Be so kind as to sing a verse."

Avery threw back his head and in a deep baritone began, "The moon on the ocean was dimmed by a ripple..."

When he finished a verse, James checked him with a finger. "Thank you. That should be enough time." He slid open the back panel on the camera and drew out a small plate. He held it up to the light. "Mr. Dawes, we now have a near-complete geographical survey of this island."

"Wonderful, Mr. Blankenship. What can you tell us of our new home?"

"That we are merely guests." James showed him a plate. In the tiny image depicted, Dawes could distinguish, through the towering peaks, on the far shore, a collection of buildings. The photograph was too small and blurry to determine much about their character, but they seemed to be of fairly recent European build. "Shall we take a stroll?"

They followed the shore until a series of basaltic cliffs forced them inland. James spoke little at first, for the terrain was difficult, and he had to struggle for breath. But Avery was expansive, as was his wont, and he spoke at length of his interests, primarily cricket and hunting. Being unfamiliar with these subjects, James attempted to draw the conversation toward natural philosophy, and he was delighted to find that Avery *had* heard of Darwin – but only through *Punch*.

"I'm a man of action, Jim. I confess I find it difficult to sit in a reading room all day." They were

resting in a grove for a moment before continuing.

“To which club do you belong?”

“Reform.”

“They’ve one of the best libraries in the city! It’s a shame you’d not take advantage of it.”

“One of the best chefs, too. What’s your club, then?”

James stiffened slightly. “I belong to no clubs.”

“No club! What sort of gentleman – forgive me, old boy, I’m just shocked. And why not?”

James spoke quickly. “Pardon me, but I find them puerile. My time is all too valuable.”

“And what do you do with all that time of yours? If I may inquire.”

“You are exceedingly familiar in your speech, Mr. Dawes, but I sense that no offense is intended. Rather, I conclude this is how you approach all your acquaintances. Am I correct?” James sat on a root and wiped his brow.

“That you are, Jim!” Avery laughed.

“Mr. Blankenship’ will suffice. To answer your question, my primary occupation – and preoccupation, for that matter – is the search for a set of mathematical laws to describe the observed phenomena of this sphere, and other spheres, and the practical application of those laws in the realms of heat, chemistry, physical motion, pneumatics, and, to a lesser extent, electricity. What do you do, Mr. Dawes?”

“Ah, you’ve got me trumped there, Mr. Blankenship,” Avery said, grinning. “If it’s not raining, I go for a wicket or two with the chaps. If the weather’s foul, I have a pint at the club. Nothing so grand as your endeavors.”

“Hmph,” James said, not quite pleased at his own ostentatious display. “I have an unfortunate tendency to produce in others the impression that I am... tooting my own horn, to use a colloquialism. Trust me that there is little self-aggrandizement in my speech; it is simply the way I talk. My work is

all-important to me, so it comes to the fore quite often. There is no posturing involved. At least very little”, he said, hiding a sly smile. “I confess vanity is my perpetual bugbear. But come now, I’m sure there’s much more to you than that.”

“I travel,” Avery said. “I hunted buffalo in America, bagged a tiger in India, and I’ve dallied in Greece, Rome, and Egypt.”

“Impressive,” James replied. “What I’d give to dig amongst the dusty bones of the Empire!”

“Yes, it was something of a lark!”

At that moment they heard a low groaning, and, before their brains could process the sound and its meaning, the earth shook. Avery, who had remained standing, was thrown to the ground. The palm trees swayed with the tremor, and in the surrounding forest birds burst into flight.

“A bit of an earthquake!” Avery said, getting to his feet and dusting off.

“Not an earthquake proper, Mr. Dawes! Rather the first shudders of a waking giant.” James pointed to the large mountain Avery had first noticed. The wisp of smoke had thickened to a dark plume. “I believe that volcano is active. Restless at his red-hot forge, coals choking fiery gorge, ancient Hephaestus stirs.”

“By Gad,” Avery said.

“Our incentive to fly from this island has just waxed.”

“I concur. All haste, Mr. Blankenship.” Avery cocked an ear. “Something’s moving in the jungle,” he said. “I believe that tremor stirred the wildlife. A slithering, as of a snake. But – I’ve stalked pythons in Bengal, and this sounds different somehow.”

“How exciting!” James said. “If only I had my sketchbook. This island may hold species completely unknown in European circles. How does the sound differ from your Bengalese serpents?”

“It sounds... bigger,” Avery said.

Without rustling a leaf or bending a blade of grass, a tremendous serpent entered the grove, winding



forth from the forest so silently, so subtly, that the men scarcely registered its presence at first. James consciously controlled his terrified reaction. Avery moved not at all, only whispered, "Look alive, Jim."

To call the creature a snake would have seemed erroneous; it was as much a snake as Gargantua was a man. It was an antediluvian monster, a creature the existence of which denied all reason; it was unthinkable such a beast could exist in the same world as the Crystal Palace and Big Ben. The snake had the girth and length of a huge python, larger than any Avery had ever seen, but it also bore the distinctive hood of a cobra. The monster moved with liquid grace, waving back and forth as its long forked tongue flicked out.

"Why doesn't he strike?" James whispered, his thin limbs poised to dodge any attack.

"He's... tasting us," Avery said. The hood flared and rippled with a sinister undulation of muscles. "Oh, God, I've seen this sort of thing in India. Don't look into its eyes, Jim."

But it was too late. Unable to resist his curiosity, James had examined the creature minutely, his gaze traveling along its magnificent muscular coils, from the barbed and twitching tail to the insidious head, forty-five feet later. And finally his gaze met the unblinking stare of those reptilian eyes. They transfixed him utterly, the serpent's mesmerizing gaze instantly overpowering James's considerable will. It is known throughout the world that the reptile is a cunning creature, and it will not pursue its victims when it can simply command them. Helplessly, James stepped forward.

"Stop, Jim," Avery whispered urgently. "Stop!"

James was well within the snake's reach, but it did not strike, wanting to savor the prospect of slaughter as much as the slaughter itself. Only when it could no longer forestall the pleasure of killing would it release its hypnotic grip on the victim. Then, a moment of horror before the prey was crushed in its coils or bitten and injected with blistering venom. Avery had seen it numerous times at street-corner shows in India with a cobra and a rat. His every muscle tensed, ready for action. James took another step.

The hideous jaws opened, revealing fangs like

those of a saber-toothed tiger. Once Avery had witnessed a python swallowing a wild pig; he had no doubt this one could consume a hippopotamus.

In a lightning-streak of glinting scale and fang, the beast struck. Avery lunged, moving with a speed he did not know he had. In that confused half-moment, all he could do was position himself between the rushing head and his hypnotized companion, but it was enough. The motion of the snake's strike was interrupted before it could bring its fangs to bear, and its great head collided with Avery's chest, sending him rolling on the jungle floor. A cannon fired point-blank into his ribs would have hurt less.

But his intervention had effected James's release. The spell was broken, allowing the stupor to dissipate and terror to take its place. "Avery!" he cried, rushing to the fallen man and helping him to his feet.

Meanwhile, the serpent, frustrated in its murder-lust, shook its head ferociously and began coiling for another attack, one that would not fail.

"I think it propitious to flee," James said.

They sprinted through the brush, twisting through dangling thorn-covered vines that sought to ensnare them. James's breath burned in his lungs, but Avery sprinted with athletic ease, relying on the marvelous mechanism of his body. The serpent followed them, winding in its sideways fashion across the forest floor, threading the trees with alarming alacrity. It would soon have them.

"Mr. Dawes," James said, his customary coolness returning, even as he struggled for breath, "it is known within herpetological circles that snakes have a very limited range of hearing, displaying no sensitivity to many sounds well within human perception." He ducked beneath a tree branch. Behind them, they heard the steady sibilant hiss of their gaining pursuer. "In fact, they have no true sense of hearing. They merely detect vibrations through the ground."

His voice was faint for lack of breath, but James continued his explanation. "It is also known that the majority of snakes have rather limited vision – though, unfortunately, less limited among the arboreal species. Their primary means of perception

is through the tasting of particles in the dust and air. Now, the wind seems to be blowing from a north-northeasterly vector. We may not be able to outdistance our foe, but we may be able to elude him."

"Say no more, Mr. Blankenship!" Avery cried. In a final burst of speed, he ducked around a convenient boulder to the right, or downwind. James pursued him, the snake not far behind. As soon as he rounded the corner, a strong hand gripped his collar and hauled him upward, into the lower branches of a banyan tree. After scarcely a moment's pause, James climbed further into the tree, Avery above him. They rested on a broad branch almost twenty feet above the ground.

"Have a care," Avery whispered, pointing above James's head. Cautiously, James looked up. A beehive the size of a watermelon hung inches above his head, swarming with its venomous residents. Their arrival had agitated the bees, and they buzzed angrily. James froze.

Below, the sinuous shape of the serpent crossed their vision. They saw the great head swing back and forth and the forked tongue dart in and out. They dared not breathe. After an eternity of waiting, it slithered into the forest. Still they waited.

It returned to search once more the area where they had disappeared, having made a full circuit of the area, hearing nothing, but scenting their presence. James knew a snake could go for weeks without food or rest, whereas they, after a day and a night, would weaken from thirst and fatigue and drop from the tree. But James had no doubt the creature would detect them before then, and then they would learn how well it could climb.

The moonlight glinted off steel. Avery had drawn a small revolver from his pocket. James shook his head. The miniscule bullets would have no effect on the bescaled monster.

An idea came to him. "The *Apis mellifera scutella*," he whispered. "The common African honey bee. Mr. Dawes, have you a penknife?" Avery gave him the requested implement. With infinite care, James stood, unfolded the knife, and sawed at the thin branch from which the hive hung. "Rather docile when handled calmly." He severed the branch, and

held it, hive and all, at arm's length. "But quick to anger when their home is assaulted." He dropped it, at the precise moment that the serpent turned its searching gaze upward.

The hive smashed on its wedge-shaped nose, bursting in a pulpy splatter of honeycomb and furious bees. Seeking an object for their wrath, they enveloped the snake in a whining, buzzing cloud, stinging it over and over, crawling in its slitted nostrils to attack the unprotected flesh. It opened its great maw in a fit of panic, and the insects swarmed down its pink throat. Wild, blind convulsions took it, and the great asp spasmed horribly, lashing the trees and brush with its tail. Hounded by its hundreds of assailants, it fled into the jungle.

"Bravo, Jim!" Avery cried. "He'll think twice before tangling with *us*!"

"He'll respect bees, at the least," James consented. "As for us, though, I'm sure he only has hatred to augment his natural serpentine malevolence. I suggest we make it difficult for him to find us."

"Seconded." Avery dropped through the branches. James followed with less grace, and by nightfall they had put several miles between themselves and their reptilian predator.

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Avery tossed an armful of branches on the fire. "I say," he mused, "if our scaly scallywag was any indication, the fauna of this island might be inclined to the 'mega' in general."

"I'm beginning to think so," James replied. "It's quite scintillating, really. I know from Darwin's notebooks that such a thing is possible. Isolated populations evolve along different paths than large, general populations. If this island has had little or no contact with the mainland since its formation – it evidently being distant enough to prohibit swimming, and odds prevailing against fresh breeding stock arriving via floating mats of vegetation – then it is quite possible that nature has taken a free hand."

"Too free a hand, if you ask me. But is it possible?"

"Why not? Nature, after all, produced the

dinosaurs, the dread leviathans that once ruled the world over. Why could it not produce this creature? The evidence is before your eyes.”

“The evidence almost swallowed you whole.”

“Hmm.” James nodded. “I am grateful for your intervention.”

“Quite all right, old boy.”

“Have you suffered any injury?”

“Perhaps a cracked rib or two. Hardly worth mentioning.” Avery shrugged, a gesture that hurt his wracked body more than he showed. He wasn’t concerned, though; by morning, his vigorous constitution would be almost completely recovered from the battering. “What I wonder is this – what other surprises are in store for us? I dread to think the serpent might be the least of our troubles.”

“The possibilities confound speculation. In an ecological system so altered, so diverged from our own that it might produce *that* slithering horror, anything might happen.” James rubbed his hands together, his mind working. “If only I had my sketchbook!”

“For me, I’m satisfied if we never see another biological curiosity. We should reach the colony soon,” Avery said. “Or whatever those buildings are. It’s deuced puzzling that there should be civilized men on this island.”

“Deuced,” James said tentatively, as if trying the word for the first time.

“In the meantime, let’s get some rest. We’ve got hard walking tomorrow. The fire should burn until dawn, and keep the beasties away.”

“Some species are actually drawn to flames,” James remarked. “The venomous iguanas of Baja California, for instance...”

“That’s enough for now,” Avery said, a bit sharply. “We must sleep.”

But the events of the day had fired James’s keen and querulous mind, and sleep would not come to him. He reclined on his bed of palm fronds and gazed at the moon, full and beautifully bright.

“It’s strange to think that the same moon looks down on us here as in London,” Avery said suddenly, interrupting James’s ponderings, which were coincidental.

“Not so strange. The moon is of sufficient distance to be visible anywhere on the terrestrial sphere.”

Avery snorted. “Well, of course. I didn’t mean it literally. Of course it’s the same moon.” James detected a tone of irritation in his voice.

“I apologize. I tend to the literal.”

“I noticed.”

“After all,” James said, his hands crossed on his stomach, his voice growing heavy with sleep, “its visibility is not strange. What’s strange is how a great sphere of cheese can gleam so brightly.”

Avery chuckled.

James continued. “Especially when you consider that it is no larger than your thumbnail. See, I can cover it easily.” He imposed his thumb between his vision and the moon, blotting it out. Avery laughed.

“Now, what I find strange is why the cities of the moon-men are not visible, neither to the naked eye nor to our most powerful telescopes.”

Avery was quiet for a moment. “I’m confused. Are you still jesting?”

“Oh, no, Avery, I was jesting earlier. The moon is, of course, a massive rock, at least one hundred miles in diameter. But regarding the cities of the moon-men, I am quite serious. You must excuse the rather droll term ‘moon-men’. Until we have contacted them and learned their preferred appellation, it will have to suffice.”

After a moment Avery burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry, what is the joke?” James asked.

“Well,” Avery said between guffaws, “I was under the impression that you were a gentleman of supreme learning. And now I discover that you believe in men on the moon! I’ve never heard anything more – beg your pardon – ridiculous!”



"And why is that so ridiculous? Why can't there be men on the moon?"

"For one thing, it's too hot. Just look at it. To burn even one-tenth as brightly as the sun it must be at least one-tenth as hot, right?"

"On the contrary," James replied, "the climate of the moon is actually quite cool and refreshing. I imagine it is like the Isle of Wight on a spring day."

"How are you so convinced of these moon-people?" Avery asked.

"Let us say it has always been a preoccupation of mine, a paternal inheritance."

"You mentioned your father earlier today. May I inquire – what line is he in?"

"That is known only to himself and Providence. I last saw him on my fifteenth birthday," James answered in clipped tones. He rolled over on his palm-bed, his back to the fire and Avery, and spoke no more.

"My old man's a greengrocer!" Avery said with feigned avidity, wanting to fill the silence. "He started with a dogcart full of apples, and now he owns a half-dozen warehouses in Wapping. 'Bless this country,' he always told me, 'anywhere else and I'd still be pulling my cart.' I pulled it, too, often enough. He wanted me to appreciate our money. 'That was never a problem, sir,' I told him, 'I've always appreciated our money...' No difficulty there, eh, Jim?"

But if James was awake, he gave no indication of having heard him. Presently Avery rolled over, too, and drifted to uneasy sleep, haunted by sinking ships and demonic snakes.

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Morning brought a fresh tremor that shook the men into wakefulness and set the trees swaying. Soon coconuts thudded to the ground all around them. They covered their heads and waited for the rain of fruit to end. A strange sound reached their ears, so different from the soft rhythm of the falling nuts that they wondered for a moment whether they had heard it at all.

"By Jove!" Avery cried. "That sounded like a nut falling on metal! This way!" They dashed in the direction of the sound, slapping aside broad leaves and tall, thorny weeds. "There!"

They caught a glint of sunlight on glass, the half-glimpsed suggestion of a dome, and their quarry vanished amongst the trees. They pursued it briefly, following the strange noise it issued, somewhere between the clicking of spider-legs and the unwinding of a spring-driven toy. Then the noise faded, and it was lost. "What manner of beast...?" Avery wondered.

"I sincerely doubt it was a beast," James said. "The sound seemed mechanical in nature."

Avery threw his hands up. "I'm ready to believe anything."

"An unhealthy mindset. Belief is the foe of perception. Let us consider the evidence."

"What evidence?"

"The evidence of our senses. We heard the sound of metal. We can be sure of that. Furthermore, we have these prints." James pointed. In the path of the anomaly was a series of unusual tracks: a single deep hole, perfectly circular, surrounded by four equally-spaced, shallow depressions, rectangular in shape. "No organic creature known to me leaves such tracks."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I suggest nothing. I merely state my particular and applicable ignorance." He shrugged. "There's nothing further to be gained here. Why not breakfast upon these fresh-fallen coconuts?"

Avery split the nuts with a rock. They drank the cool juice, welcome to their parched throats, and scooped out the flesh with Avery's penknife. "You seem to be carrying yourself well," Avery said. "Only yesterday you told me your health was failing, and here you are, ruddy-cheeked and bright-eyed."

"I suppose the exercise is revivifying. But mainly I find the naturalist aspects of this journey stimulating. We have already glimpsed one hitherto-unknown species, and have encountered a second

anomaly. Who knows what we will discover before our departure? Few are so privileged as we."

Avery rubbed his aching ribs. "I admit I hadn't considered that."

"I can tell you, Mr. Dawes, that before our arrival here, I was in something of a torpor. I spoke yesterday of my dilettantism. This tendency, regrettably, is hardly the desperate activity of an overactive mind. It is, rather, the symptom of a deep, inextirpable ennui. Thus my torpor. London, that great city – no, greatest of cities – unfortunately lacks such excitement as we have enjoyed here."

James's eyes glowed with excitement. "Undiscovered species to observe. A new ecology to catalogue, to dissect and lay bare for the world to understand. The mind of the natural philosopher, Mr. Dawes, is a hungry one, always seeking something new, something remarkable and fresh! Without novelty – torpor, ennui, sterility!"

"And the walking is good, too."

"No doubt of that!"

They resumed their hike, and by noon they stood on a high ridge with a long slope before them. The foliage thinned to a broad plain, and moving across the plain was a thick herd of grazing animals, too distant to identify. This pastoral valley, hemmed by mountains on both sides, continued to the shining sea, and at the far end, perhaps two miles distant, stood the little cluster of buildings.

The huge cone of the volcano loomed behind them and cast its shadow over the valley. It sent a fresh exhalation of sulfurous gases leeward, stifling their breath and burning their eyes.

"Almost clear, Blankenship!" Avery cried. "We just reach that village and then it's pack your bags, chap!"

"Not so hasty, Mr. Dawes," James said. "Allow me to draw your attention to these grazing animals."

"They remind me of antelopes."

"Yet they have no horns, and their gait is quite contrary to that of the ungulate. Note, also, that the

bodies are barrel-shaped."

"What do you propose they are?"

"I believe them to be an oversized rodent, akin to the capybara, or the Venezuelan water pig. Are you familiar with the supercontinent theory?"

"Of course," Avery mumbled. He was studying the slope, searching for an easy route to the valley. He did not like the look of the hill; it seemed treacherous and steep.

"I should like to examine a specimen at greater length, but if the species are related, this gives strong credence to that theory. Caution, Mr. Dawes." Avery was picking his way down the hillside. "I expect difficulty ahead."

"Why's that?" Avery asked.

"Note the body of water. This is the center of the local ecology. Our friends the capybara have posted sentries, as well, noses to the wind. They expect predators. Great Heavens, what is *that*?" He pointed at a newcomer to the valley.

Lumbering from the brush was a creature resembling a rhinoceros in size and shape, but wholly new in all other respects. Bony plating covered it, bestowing the appearance of an armored warhorse. The plating was spiky and jagged, and two sets of long horns, one on the snout and one on the brow, completed the creature's ferocity.

"It's astonishing! The plating of a glyptodon and the form of a rhinoceros! I feel positively faint." James steadied himself on a tree. "The glyptodon, you know, has been found exclusively in South America, and the rhinoceros, of course, is a solely African and Asian species. This hints at a common ancestor – interesting in its own right, but hugely significant in regard to the supercontinent theory. What wonders this island holds!"

Another, smaller than the first, emerged from the trees. "And this, its mate? Do you realize, Mr. Dawes, that we are observing prehistoric life?"

"Not the first to do so. Those buildings look inhabited."

"But what manner of man might live there?"

If news of a place such as this had reached the scientific community, the sensation would be tremendous. Who could live here and not report what he has seen?"

"Let's find out," Avery replied, skipping down the slope. James followed, his heart rejoicing in the wonder of their surroundings, but a cloud of dread gathering nonetheless. The volcano added an unfavorable rumble to their retreat.

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They descended, picking their footings carefully, for a loose rock or a patch of mud might spell injury or death. Here and there were open shafts, lava tubes formed in long-cooled flows. They dropped at random angles into the hillside, and some seeped sulfurous smoke.

"Be careful," James said. "Those are still somewhat active. There might be lava just out of sight."

Shuddering at the thought, Avery redoubled his caution.

After they had descended halfway, James called a rest. "My nerves are positively shot," he said, wiping his brow. "A lack of decent rest, and this climb, physically, is rather -"

He never finished the sentence, for the matted vegetation on which he stood suddenly slipped beneath his feet, and he tumbled downward, pitching headlong. He bounced once on the stony ground, then vanished from sight. Avery rushed to the point where he had disappeared. James had fallen into a vertical lava tube. Avery squinted; he could just barely see James, sprawled on a bed of white rocks, perhaps fifteen feet down.

Avery cupped his hands and shouted. "Rest easy, Jim, I'm coming!" A suffering groan was the only reply.

The walls of the lava tube had an igneous smoothness. Free climbing was out of the question. Avery ripped a vine from the nearest tree. It was too thin to support his weight, let alone theirs combined. Working quickly, he stripped a nearby banyan of its vines and wove them together in a crude braid.

Avery tied his makeshift rope around a tree trunk and lowered himself over the ledge. He dropped the final two yards, landing on the balls of his feet with a cat's grace. A sickly scent assaulted him. "Wake up, Jim, wake up," he said, slapping James's cheeks lightly. His vision gradually adjusted, and horror gripped him.

He stood not on white rocks, but on heaped skeletons. A second glance told him that they were human. Avery peered into the darkness; the tunnel ran at a shallow grade further into the volcano. Bones littered the path. Gusts of hot air blew from the shaft like the breath of some extinct titan. In the depths Avery glimpsed an ebbing red glow.

"What?" James said blearily.

"Thank God you're awake, Jim. We seem to have found..."

"An ossuary," James said. "Nor are all these skeletons withered. Some are quite fresh. Do you notice, Mr. Dawes, a certain disquieting commonality of all these corpses?"

"No heads," Avery said.

James tapped his nose. "Spot on."

"Where could they be?"

"I don't know, but there's neither mandible nor maxilla to be seen. But quiet! I hear something!" James pointed upward, and they strained their ears.

It was the same whirring and clicking that they had first heard that same morning, waxing in volume. The source of the sound came to a stop at the edge of the pit, and they shrank into the darkness, not wanting to be seen. The overhead sun blazed down, drowning the outlines of the trees in white brilliance. But a form, barely distinguishable in the sunlight, appeared at the edge of the pit.

A single large bulb of gleaming glass surmounted a squat, cylindrical frame, from which protruded six or seven spidery legs that moved with eerie liteness, grasping, feeling, caressing with such insidiousness that the men could not repress shudders. The sunlight was too bright for them to see what lurked within the bulb, and for that



Avery was grateful. As they watched, another of the strange creatures appeared, and together they dragged an unseen freight to the edge of the pit. Avery stifled a cry as a headless body came crashing into the tube, scattering bones as it landed.

But the beings above had heard him, and they froze in their path, then returned to the pit, clicking and whirring the while. One stepped experimentally over the edge, its spider-leg digging into the smooth rock. James saw the large central pole forming the foot, and the four equidistant toes; there was no question that this was the creature of the prints.

"If these are the busy decapitators, we want nothing to do with them," James said, and by an unspoken consensus they fled down the tunnel, deep into the bowels of the earth.

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The heat grew more stifling as they ran, until finally they were forced to stop and lean red-faced and panting against the walls.

"Have we eluded them?" James gasped.

"How could we? There's only one way we could have gone. I'll wager they're still behind us, taking their time. They know they've got us. What I wonder is – what were those things?"

"They seemed mechanical in nature," James said. "And if machines, they have an operator, no doubt in the compound. This requires a revision of our plan."

"What manner of machine could they be? Our science is capable of great wonders, to be sure, but nothing of that complexity."

"The same principle that drives a pocket watch can power an automaton," James said. "It is merely a matter of elaboration on that principle. I suggest we continue walking while we converse, lest they gain on us. I don't know how quickly those spider-feet will convey them, but I have no wish to find out."

The red glow waxed in brightness. It soon became apparent that it was a turgid stream of lava, the lifeblood of the earth, coursing sluggishly in its subterranean vessels. Another tube converged with

theirs for a brief span, before flowing away on its own course.

Avery pointed at what looked like old rice-paper piled in the corridor. "Snake-skins," he said. "I fear our old friend might make his home in these tunnels."

"The fumes might prove deadly," James said. "Fashion a mask from your handkerchief, Mr. Dawes. Thus."

The path followed the stream, narrowing to little more than a ledge, then diverging from the stream to enter a low tunnel on the far side of the long chamber. To escape the chamber, they would have to traverse that thin ribbon of rock, no wider than four inches at one point.

"I don't like the look of that footing," James said. "This igneous rock can be as slick as glass."

"Do we have a choice, James?" Avery said. "It's move along or meet the spider-creatures."

The lava churned, bubbles bursting slowly. "I should like to see the surface soon," James said. "The agitation of this lava suggests instability, and while a volcanic eruption may be unpleasant when one is in the vicinity, I'm certain the unpleasantness is even greater at the point of origin."

They removed their boots, so that they might grip the rock more effectively. The floor was almost unbearably hot. They crossed the narrow path, clinging to the wall with their fingertips, holding their breath all the while, as if the slight motion of inhalation would suffice to dislodge them from their precarious balance.

Fumes fogged James's mind. He fought for concentration. The heat was overpowering. They edged along with excruciating slowness, walking a veritable knife-edge. A slip meant extinction in the molten rock.

James's vision blurred. They were scarcely halfway across the ledge. He wondered whether fiery death in the lava would be painful, or if the heat of two thousand degrees Fahrenheit would instantly disintegrate his flesh. Certainly there were worse ways to die. Occupied by these thoughts, he scarcely noticed when Avery, overcome by the heat and the

fumes, lost his balance and pitched sideways.

“Dawes!” James cried, stretching out his hand. The terror of death was in Avery’s eyes. Their hands caught for one brief moment, but the fragile grip broke, and Avery fell.

By a desperate lunge, James caught his foot, and Avery swung downward, his head hanging just feet from the lava. James lay flattened on the ledge, slipping over, slowly and inexorably. His muscles screamed in protest at Avery’s weight; he knew he could not hold him much longer, and he knew that by holding him he only condemned himself to the same fiery fate, but he would not relinquish his grip.

“I’m cooking!” Avery said.

The volcano groaned, the dread titan stirring and shaking the millions of tons of stone that imprisoned him. At that moment, James became aware of the clicking of the spider-creatures. A frantic glance to his left told him that three of them had entered the chamber and were feeling their way across the ledge. He could see them much better now; they had six legs, long and with three joints. The cylindrical base had two short and articulate arms ending in pincers that opened and closed continuously, as if eager to tear and mangle flesh. But the crowning horror was the globe. James could see it clearly for the first time. It housed, not a box of twirling gears as he had expected, but a human head floating in some thick translucent fluid. Wires and hoses ran like surrogate veins from the neck and into the cylinder. Splints of metal were fashioned to the bald and pickled scalp. An eyepiece rather like a monocle covered one eye; the other stared blindly ahead.

From a wire grating on the cylinder a harsh, flat voice issued: “You have no need to fear. You have no need to fear.”

“Oh, merciful Jesus,” Avery cried, “they’re horrifying!”

“Keep still, Dawes,” James hissed. “I’m in a rather distressing position.”

“I hate to add to your distress, old boy, but kindly glance to your right.”

James did so. Avery’s earlier guess proved true; their scaly nemesis indeed made its home in the tunnels. Their terror mounted as it slithered from the forward tunnel, its great bulk filling entirely the far side of the chamber where they had intended to flee. The serpent coiled and waited for its prey. James noted with fleeting satisfaction the many welts on its nose and face.

His arms felt as if they would tear from his shoulders at any moment. James imagined his sinews stretching beyond endurance and finally snapping, and Avery plummeting to a horrible death, while he remained on the ledge, alive but armless. He would not let that happen.

“No need to fear. No need to fear. No need to fear.” All three of the spider-people spoke in chorus as they advanced. The dissonance of the mingled mechanical voices was truly awful.

A tremor of devastating force shook the mountain. One of the spider-people slipped, his six legs scrabbling for purchase, failing, and the mechanical being plunged over the ledge, issuing an elongated tone that James estimated as a C#. (Only later did he realize this was a scream.) The mechanism hit the lava, its metal legs glowing a brilliant red, then breaking at the joints. The pieces quickly dissolved in the lava. The dome lasted a bit longer, until the sheer heat shattered it. The human remnant within vanished in a breath of flame.

Another tremor rippled through the cavern, and the ceiling fissured, the fissures widened, and boulders the size of elephants dropped from the ceiling, spraying lava where they fell, before the current bore them away. James felt fatigue gnawing at him. To their left, the spider-people approached; to the right, the serpent waited calmly for its dinner.

“I say,” Avery said, “a bit of a sticky wicket!”

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James and Avery were both educated men and were consequently familiar with the saga of Ulysses: of how he thwarted numerous foes and escaped diverse perils in his quest. Particularly prominent in James’s mind at that moment was the chapter concerning Scylla and Charybdis, the many-headed monster and the voracious whirlpool between which

one must pass. He pondered Fuseli's rendition, with the classical Odysseus in all his nude majesty, astride his narrow craft, fending off the demonic and leering visages of his foes. The great captain had chosen to surrender six of his men.

"I will make no surrender," James vowed between gritted teeth. "We throw ourselves into the crashing sea, then! Prepare yourself, Avery!"

"For what exactly?" The last syllable became a howl as James swung him outward and relinquished his grip. Avery fell perhaps eight inches, and a terminal grunt interrupted his howl as he hit upon the broad surface of a passing boulder, newly formed by the volcano's spasms. He quickly found his balance. "Quick thinking, James! It's bloody hot, but not quite so sweltering as the lava. Coming aboard?"

All James had to do was time his fall accurately, and for that he was thankful. He had no strength left. He hit the broiling stone, and Avery secured him with a strong arm. The current carried them swiftly away. "Regards!" Avery shouted at the receding shapes of the spider-people. The serpent, frustrated again, hissed its anger and slithered back into its tunnel. Soon the chamber was lost to view, and the adventurers had new considerations.

"We seem to be sinking," Avery said.

"Of course. The lava is, after all, molten rock, quite hot enough to reduce our current transport to slag."

"That shouldn't be a problem. This stone will cook us before that happens."

"A relief, then, that we need not add that to our list of worries."

They rounded a bend in the stream. Ahead was a small platform where they might land. A low passage opened on the platform.

"We could jump ashore there," Avery said.

"Unfortunately, I believe the current will bear us away. Too far to jump, and shortfall would be fatal."

"I suppose we'll cook, then."

"Nay, Mr. Dawes. Now is the time to employ your revolver. See that stalactite?"

"No."

"Look upward, Mr. Dawes. Stalagmites protrude from the ground, stalactites depend from the ceiling. Here is a mnemonic device for you. Stalagmite has a 'g' for ground, stalactite a 'c' for ceiling. Simplicity itself."

"Noted," Avery said, and fired with both hands. The bullet crashed into the stalactite, shattering the fragile rock, its destructive force augmented by the considerable weight of the formation. The massive spike plunged into the lava, blocking their path, and the boulder bounced off it as neatly as a croquet ball off a stake. Thus deflected, the boulder beached with a great grinding noise. Avery sprang ashore, then helped James, who was near death from exhaustion.

"Should we escape, I'll never so much as ride the Underground again," he said. "I've had enough of this subterranean nonsense. Give me the sun and fresh air." As he said this, a hot wind blasted by them, whistling through the low tunnel. "Ah, there it is. The gods are heeding my words. Things are back to normal."

James laughed, despite his weakened state. "Only the gods of chance. That wind means we've found a vent. The hot air seeks to rise. Our prior passage offered no direct conduit to the surface. This must be such a conduit. A moment to rest, though, before we vanish once more into the unknown." He stretched on the relatively cool rock bank and closed his eyes. "I am all but spent."

"I can tell," Avery said. "You have my gratitude, Jim. I owe you my life."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Dawes," James whispered. "I did what any upright British citizen would do."

"But you did it admirably." Avery squeezed James's thin bicep. "We'll make a man of you yet!"

James smiled. "Condescension and gratitude mingled in the same cup."

"I apologize, I didn't mean to – "



"All's well, Mr. Dawes. You took the serpent's strike that would have slain me. I had the fortune to return the favor. I've leant heavily on you thus far, and I will surely have occasion to lean again."

"I will strive to be the sturdiest leaning-stick, then!" Avery clapped his hands together. "I will be an immobile post!"

"A worthy aspiration. I wouldn't mind a hand up, if you please. I am ready to drag my carrion onward."

And drag themselves they did, for the tunnel was so low that it would permit no other motion than a laborious crawl upwards. Avery moved steadily, feeling himself at a point beyond exhaustion, where his limbs could move eternally of their own accord. James, though, suffered every ounce of his fatigue, his body already strained from the ordeal on the ledge. But ahead of them floated a distant square of light that promised escape.

After endless crawling, they emerged, blinking, into daylight. Avery flopped on his back, arms outstretched, and sucked in fresh air. "There's a welcome sight!" he said. Before them was the verdant valley. They were again on the slope of the volcano, but at a much higher point than when they had entered the tunnels. They were perhaps halfway up the slope, near the vent from which the smoke issued, but still some distance from the snowcapped peak.

They rested for several hours before hunger and thirst compelled them to move. "One moment, Mr. Dawes. I have never beheld an active volcano, and I cannot let this opportunity slip. Will you accompany me?" Avery nodded; he might lack James's intellectual curiosity, but a spectacle of spraying lava promised to be entertaining. They clambered up the slope to the lip, where the familiar hot fumes blasted them. James held his handkerchief to his face and peered over.

It was a scene from Dante. The vent brimmed with bubbling lava, churning with the release of sulfurous gases. The lava glowed in a range of colors from a brick red to bright, eye-searing orange. As they watched, small rocks near the surface of the lava glowed with infernal heat and melted into the natural crucible. "It seems to be rising, Mr. Dawes," James whispered. "And the rim is of extraordinary

fragility. It might crack at any time. Look, brimstone." He indicated a yellow crust of sulfur on the rim of the volcano.

"Fire, too," Avery replied. "A more complete picture of hell I've never seen. Shall we go?"

They resumed their descent, so abruptly interrupted by James's tumble earlier in the day. Their caution was doubled, and they suffered no mishaps. By nightfall they had reached the broad belt of forest that surrounded the relatively treeless valley.

"Allow me to share a trick I learned while chasing tigers in Bengal," Avery said, after they had sated their appetites on coconuts. "If we sleep on the ground, we stand a good chance of having our rest interrupted by being eaten. But, here..." He swung into the spreading branches of a banyan and nestled himself in the joint of three large limbs. "I sleep as comfortably as in a hammock." He helped James up. They watched the night sky; a flock of bats passed overhead.

"We must reconsider our plan," James said. "We have yet to find a definite connection between these... spider-creatures – which, by the way, I have named 'arachnines,' a compromise of the obvious Latin roots and sonic affability – and our intended destination, but we must assume one. The settlement is obviously human in origin, and so are these mechanical beings. It is not unreasonable to expect we might find one with the other, and, for the nonce, I would rather avoid them. And yet, we must do everything in our power to secure our means of escape. The volcano demands it. The testimony of the citizens of Pompeii should convince you."

"Oh, definitely," Avery said. "They make an excellent calzone prosciutto there." He kissed his thumb and forefinger.

After a moment James continued. "Regrettably, the most likely avenue for egress is through that compound. Presumably, they retained their original conveyance for future use. Or, they might have a means of signaling the mainland. At the least, they are surely supplied by boat from time to time. The only question is to their intentions."

"The pit of headless corpses makes me wary."

"Ah, but you understand, Mr. Dawes, that the heads survive. Perhaps you could not see from your vantage during that unfortunate episode, but the domes are occupied by, and, I believe, the whole structure is piloted by the extant heads of those same humans."

"Ghastly."

"Somewhat, I agree. Yet they assured us that we had no need to fear them. Their intentions might be peaceful. Panic seized me at the time, but, on further reflection, I am convinced that they spoke the truth."

"And what is the difference to us?" Avery asked, his voice cool and calm.

"What is the difference? The difference is that we might have refuge after all! They might yet aid us in our escape. Not to mention the knowledge they would have to offer. By the testimony of our eyes, their technology is capable of amazing things. Think of what they have to offer!"

"What they have to offer!" Avery snorted. "They've put their own heads in pickle jars! I couldn't see them, maybe, and I'm grateful for that, but I heard those voices – flat, without emotion, like a weary phonograph. Dried, dusty, every trace of human feeling long evaporated. What they have to offer is the apex of horror, my friend."

"You miss my contention," James replied. "I propose simply that we ally ourselves with them temporarily in order to flee this island, not that we surrender our bodies or compromise our immortal souls." His voice had just a hint of mockery, but that hint did not escape Avery's keen ears, and it set them burning.

"No," he said, his revulsion changing quickly to anger. "I heard the tone in your voice, and, were it not dark, I'd wager half my fortune that you had that gleam in your eye. I've known you scarcely two days, and already I recognize that gleam. You're like an opium fiend when a fresh pipe is lain before him." He raised his voice to overpower James's protest. "But that hunger for knowledge can take you places you should not venture, Jim. And I won't be dragged into it. Let us build a raft and sail for the mainland instead. But I promise you, if you continue to that compound, you will go alone."

"Then I should get started," James said, and he dropped from the tree and disappeared into the night.

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Choking on his indignation, James stumbled through the brush. The nerve of that imbecile! At first, he had imagined that Avery would prove a fitting companion – no great thinker, but an able body and a genial disposition. He had not foreseen the brute elbowing his way into James's realm of expertise, daring to make so-called moral decisions on his behalf.

But, he reasoned, Avery was not all bad. He had saved his life, but James had since returned that favor. They were even, then, and he was in every way justified in abandoning his companion.

There lurked at the back of James's mind the possibility that the fault was not entirely Avery's. More than once James had been called irascible, a product of his cool and calculating mind, the same mind that could thread its way through a Pythagorean proof but could not navigate the complexities of a cotillion.

James would not have it any other way, of course. When faced with the rugby field or the laboratory, he had always opted for test tubes over the futile running of a ball from one point to another. He had spent his adolescence bent over a microscope or constructing capacitors, and he knew it was not wasted. Yet, in his quiet and enduring assurance of benign superiority over his simian peers, there were occasional flashes of doubt, of a terrible sensation of life half-lived; but here were his slides of *Entamoeba histolytica*, here his research in developing fluid, and here his Prince Rupert's Drops, such marvelous symbols of artifice's accomplishment.

The doubts vanished, but from time to time they returned. This blundering ape Dawes had conjured them forth again, and James resented him for it. But the work of walking and the coolth of the night dissipated his ill will; Avery was simply not his type of people. He would never get along with such unthinking souls, and that was that. It was better to retreat into the refuge of the mind and forget he had ever known the man.

So thinking, he arrived at the compound. Now he could see that it was composed of three blocky brick buildings, each several stories tall, set within high brick walls. A single iron gate faced the valley. It was closed, and appeared to have been closed for some time; the hinges were rusted and weeds grew around it.

He cupped his hands. "Hullo!" His voice returned to him. "Hullo! My name is James Blankenship, a natural historian and philosopher. I entreat entrance! I wish to confer with you!"

"... you," the echo answered. A moment later James realized that the compound was not abandoned at all. The gate was only in disrepair because the present occupants had no need of it. As he fought an unwanted surge of fear, at least a dozen of the arachnines swarmed over the wall, their metal toes clicking on the bricks. They dropped to the ground and drew in a circle around James. He ignored his rising panic.

"You have no need to fear. You have no need to fear," they chanted in their broken-phonograph voices.

"I bloody know that," James snapped. "I came to you of my own accord. Your technology is impressive. I would know what you know."

One of the creatures scuttled forward. Though it had the same hairless scalp as the others, by virtue of its cheekbones, the curve of its nose, and the shape of its eyes, James realized with a shudder that this had once been a comely young woman.

"Come with us," she said in the same flat voice. "We will share our gift of knowledge." She extended one great claw. James realized she meant him to take it. He did so, his skin crawling in revulsion while his mind marveled at the intricate workings of the claw; a second set of more delicate and articulated pincers extended from the primary set, giving the creatures, he conjectured, the dexterity to paint a picture in addition to the strength to crush stones.

"My designation is Theta."

"James Blankenship, pleased to meet you."

The gate swung open, rusty hinges screaming.

Once within, it slammed shut with ringing finality. James turned his attention to the compound. He saw that the three buildings were linked by catwalks, both high and low, along which the inhabitants traveled like arachnids on their strands of silk. One of the buildings was undoubtedly a factory, as smoke billowed from a forest of stacks on the roof, filling the yard with acrid fumes that withered the grass and choked James.

"I should like to see your laboratories."

"The primary concern is that you meet Alpha."

"Your leader, I presume?"

Theta said no more, but indicated that he should enter the shortest of the three buildings. It had no ordinary door, but a panel that slid aside with scarcely a whisper. He peered in, seeing only darkness. With stout resolve, James inhaled and entered.

After a moment a ring of light appeared in the darkness. This ring revealed another head in a globe, bigger than any of the others James had seen among the strange colony, and with a distinct countenance. Bald, of course, but with a prominent forehead, a jutting jaw, large ears, a powerful nose – that is, a head exaggerated in every feature, that the play of emotions across it might be writ large, as in the *mélodrame* that James so enjoyed. This awesome personage must be Alpha.

One eye was covered with the ubiquitous monocle-like device, and the other – was missing. Only a gaping socket. As James stared, fascinated, by this countenance more like a Greek drama mask than a human face, the monocle glowed, warming from its neutral grey-blue to a bright green. The head swiveled in its jar. The rim of the monocle rotated, as if the lens was focusing on him, and the brow creased in contemplation.

"Lights," the head said, and James was startled that the voice came from a natural human throat, not the monotone speakers of its kin. Throughout the room, lights flashed to life, revealing that James was surrounded by arachnines. The room was filled with them, floor to ceiling, resting in sockets on the walls. Their eyes were closed; they seemed to be sleeping.



"My comrades are recharging," Alpha said. "The batteries are not limitless, you know." Alpha spoke with a slight Lancashire accent.

"I assumed as much," James said. "The power required for the operation of their... chassis must be tremendous."

"You are correct. The difficulty was largely solved through the supplementation of the battery with an alternating device. Their physical motion, enabled by the initial charge from the Voltaic cells, causes the magnetic field to shift across a stator, producing an electric current. This is then stored in the Voltaic cells."

"Voltaic? Why not Daniel cells?"

"Ah. While they are capable of greater storage, they are more prone to leaks and spills. This would simply not do."

"Of course," James said. "I don't know why I didn't think of that." He approached the racks of inert chassis and examined them. "And is the workmanship all your own, Mr. Alpha?"

"Not entirely. The concepts and much of the fundamental science is my own, but as far as the fine machining, I owe a great deal to my colleagues here. Theta, whom you met, was particularly invaluable in the refinement of our optics devices."

"Your monacles."

"Yes, I suppose they appear as monacles. However, they enable us to perceive not only the visible spectrum of light, but also the thermal range, or the 'infrared' spectrum as described by Herschel. These lights are on for your convenience, not mine."

"Astonishing."

"No more so than your own work, Mr. Blankenship. I was aware of your research before our departure from the mainland. It was particularly your speculation in lunar travel that promised so much."

"That dream is dead."

"Regrettable. Indeed, it was on the strength of that work that I considered offering you an

invitation to join us."

James was amazed. "Considering? Why didn't you?"

"A little more research into your personal life, Mr. Blankenship, indicated that you might not be wholly devoted to our principles of asceticism."

"Is your current state the end of your principles?" James gestured half-scornfully.

"It is but one of many steps on the path to human perfection."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Then have a seat, Mr. Blankenship." With a grinding of servomotors, Alpha rose from his position. His mechanical body was identical to the others, but slightly larger. "You are wondering about my inclination toward individuality. That is easily answered. Even in the most egalitarian society, a leader is wanted. As I founded this community and pioneered the research of enmechanization, I was the natural candidate. Therefore I have retained my natural voice, and command a slightly grander chassis than my peers. I serve as a focal point for the community, the voice of the many."

"As to our origin. I was a surgeon, Mr. Blankenship, and I served our country well in the war in the Crimea. At Sebastopol, as I strove to separate a young boy from his mangled arm during the thick of battle, a shell crushed my tent, and shrapnel pulped my eye. Gore covered me, the detritus of human beings. I thought I was dying. And then it was I had my epiphany, Mr. Dawes. It is simple, and you might scorn it for being too obvious."

"The human form is rubbish. It burns like rubbish, shatters like rubbish, and when our organism ceases its function, we discard it, like rubbish. Only the mind has any of the qualities that we might consider human. Only through conscious thought have we lifted ourselves above the beasts of the field. But even in our so-called civilized nations we still murder one another, we gorge to stultification on food and liquor, we – fornicate." He said this last word with particular disgust.

"As I lay on my battlefield, Mr. Blankenship, I had one of those experiences much discussed in this age

of spiritualism. My soul, pure and free, flew from my body and floated wondering across the field. I saw the barricades filled with writhing masses, naked and half-naked forms struggling with one another, roiling like a ton of fish in a net, like a pit of blind cave-centipedes. But I was above it. I was free of my human shell.

"The vision ended and I returned to my fleshly prison. But I knew my purpose in life was to return to that state of skinless purity. Science led the way. I recruited my followers from my peers, and we retired to this island. A few years ago we perfected our enmechanization process, and only today have we transfigured the last of our ranks.

"Our methods have not yet reached their full fruition. Though we are largely freed of the horrors of carnal existence, we have yet this single tether, required of our detested biology. This is itself temporary. Our final research will be the transformation of human consciousness into an aether-based lifeform. Imagine it, Mr. Dawes, complete liberation from the corpse you inhabit, no more condemned to wade in dross, to scrape and claw for mouthfuls to propagate your miserable life. Nothing more than a mind, floating free.

"Surely I do not need to proselytize to a man such as you. You know what it is to work overnight only to be called away by hunger or fatigue. You know, perhaps, the unwanted and sullyng carnal impulses engendered by the female of our species, and how these impulses, when ignored, lead to excitability and an excess of bile, and, when gratified, lead to physical weariness, an excess of phlegm, corruption, torpor, and all the evils of spermatorrhea. Indeed, how often in my practice did I encounter the lunatic victim of overindulgence – easily marked by his pale complexion, his emaciated form, slouching gait, clammy palm, his glassy eye and his averted gaze. I am proud to say that I myself have never indulged in the deleterious vice of ejaculation.

"Behold our perfection, Mr. Blankenship. We are freed of those urges forever. We are nigh-immortal in our shells. We have eternity to pursue our end."

"And that end? The aetherification of your kind?" James asked.

"The aetherification of the human race," Alpha said with magnificent pride.

James's brain reeled with the enormity of it. He knew only too well the curses of physical existence. He had never desired more than his own brain for company; what Alpha proposed was staggering. Eternal life, but under such terms...

"You have the means to achieve this end?"

"We have the groundwork. Once we perfect the process here, it should be simple to create a means of effecting it worldwide, whether all at once, or nation by nation. I suppose many of the world's nations will volunteer to receive the process. The rationality of it is overwhelming. And those who do not can be made to fall in line. It is, after all, for their own good. What say you, Mr. Blankenship? Will you add your body of knowledge to ours? Will you receive the enmechanization process?"

James rested his chin on his fist and thought. At length he spoke. "What you offer is amazing, Mr. Alpha. But as much as I revere the pursuit of knowledge – nay, 'revere' is not strong enough a word. It is my life. But I use the term 'life'. I also revere a flower-fragrant breeze of a spring evening, a cool draught of bitter, a heady bite of curry. And, on the few occasions when fortune has seen fit to favor me thus, the clasp of a sweetheart's hand in mine. The impulses so engendered are not dangerous or foul, only unfamiliar. One need not fear them, only strive to understand them, as one might strive to understand the laws of pneumatics. So I must decline."

"I regret that I might have appeared to speak rhetorically," Alpha said, "and thereby gave you the unfortunate impression that you had a choice." The door slid open and two arachnines appeared. "Tau, Mu, prepare Mr. Blankenship for enmechanization."

So shocked was James that he scarcely struggled as the great claws gripped his arms. "You're mad," he whispered.

"The world is mad, Mr. Blankenship, and we are the last saviors of sanity. Take him away." His mechanical captors bore him swiftly away. He kicked and protested, but they gave no heed to his struggles.

They passed through the weed-grown courtyard and into the third building. James fought them

every step of the way, but all his efforts could not slow them one bit. They walked implacably onward, their cruel claws digging into his flesh and punishing him with nauseating pain when he protested. They reached their destination; a door slid aside, and terror drowned him.

The room was not so much a laboratory as a workshop. Apparatus of every conceivable kind filled it, including an uninhabited glass globe that James beheld with the revulsion with which one beholds one's own coffin. But most prominent was a large chair like a dentist's, with straps for securing the wrists and ankles. Beside it was a tray holding gore-covered instruments. Epsilon strapped him in. Mu extended his more articulate second set of pincers and picked up a large bone saw.

"You have no need to fear," he said, and went to work. James prayed for unconsciousness, and finally it came.

He came to through a cloud of pain and confusion. He had been dreaming. By God, he had not *really* been on that absurd island, in the company of those grotesque creatures! No, it was impossible.

He blinked and the room came into focus. Blood covered the floor. Before he could decipher what that meant, a sound near the ceiling seized his attention. He strained his eyes to look upward – he had difficulty turning his head for some reason – and focused on a grate that covered a ventilation shaft. The grate rattled, twice, then clattered to the floor. Feet protruded from the shaft, then dropped into the room, followed by the person of Avery Dawes.

Joy flooded James's heart. Never did he think he'd be so delighted to see that big brute! But the horror dawning on Avery's face plunged him into despair.

"Oh, Jim," Avery muttered, "I came too late."

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After James dropped from their arboreal abode and sulked into the darkness, Avery lay on his branch, twiddling his thumbs in resentment for the poor fool. Clearly James was letting his damnable curiosity get the better of him, and throwing himself into the lion's jaws. Let him, then! Avery would build a raft of bamboo and bludgeon lions to

death and fashion a sail from their skins and return to the mainland that way, relying only on his own resourcefulness and courage rather than the aid of those infernal arachnines.

Their mechanical motions inspired in Avery a new terror he had for the mechanical age; he was at heart a savage soul, preferring the serenity of unspoiled wilderness to the ruckus of the railyards or the clatter and furnace-blast of a steamship. Metal contraptions had always made him itch with unease, partly, he conceded, because he did not understand them.

But there were other reasons. In boyhood he had rambled through green pastures and shadow-haunted forests. And then his father had opened part of his estate for a colliery, and locomotives and their rails slashed the sward, and great drills belched noxious smoke that collected on the oak leaves and sullied the streams. When he reached his majority and moved to London, the noise, the stink, and the smoke of the city were tied irreparably to the presence of trains, of factories and their slag-heaps. Give him instead a rifle and a thousand square miles of howling wilderness.

And if the arachnines were, as James had said, partly human, then the horror was all the greater. What monstrous reasoning could lead a man to do that to himself? And how could James have anything but aversion to the idea? And – this he realized with a chilling finality – how could Avery, who pretended to be his friend, allow James to court that idea?

The better part of Avery's nature arose. James would throw himself into the lion's jaws? Then Avery would snatch him out.

Having made up his mind, he lost no moment in putting thought into action. Rather than descending to the forest floor, where any number of predators might lurk, he traversed the broad, spreading branches of the banyan. In far Calcutta, one specimen of this marvelous plant has been discovered that spans almost an acre; it is said that all of Alexander's army once breakfasted under a single tree; so it was no difficult thing for Avery to move like a monkey through the branches, and soon he caught sight of his erstwhile companion, stumbling through the undergrowth and cursing under his breath.



They arrived at the compound. Avery prepared to drop from the branches. He would show James the folly of his ways through reason and discourse. If necessary he would hit him over the head and throw him over his shoulder. But just before he descended, James called out, and Avery froze. The fool was summoning the arachnines! Soon they swarmed over the wall, and there was no question of Avery moving. It was all he could do to keep from falling out of the tree, so paralyzed was he with terror.

"Shake it off, lad," he whispered to himself. "They're still of this earth, and can be destroyed like anything made of metal or bone." His courage crept back, dispelling his fright, and he dropped to the ground and ran to the wall just as the massive gate closed behind James.

"No!" he cried. The last arachnine was vanishing over the wall as he sounded his despair, and it paused in its motion. Avery threw himself to the ground, hoping to hide in the weeds, but the arachnine remained on the wall, apparently scanning the grass. Avery cringed as he heard its metal feet tapping the brick. It was coming for him. It must have heard him, and it would destroy him with those claws, or, worse, carry him away and submit him to awful tortures and make Avery like *it*...

He stood, head thrown back, sorry to have lain down before a foe. "Here I am," he said. The arachnine approached, claws clacking.

"You have no need to fear."

"No." Avery clenched his fists. "But you do."

"You have no need to fear."

"I already said, 'no, but you do.' It was clever. Don't you listen?"

"You have no need to fear."

Avery waited, every muscle taut. "I swear, I've had better conversations with parrots."

The metal monster sprang, all six legs working together to propel it with blinding speed. It led with its vicious claws. Avery sidestepped the lunge with ease. "I went ten round with the Tipton Slasher," he

said. "You'll have to do better than that." A quick sideways lash from a spider-leg caught him in the stomach. His tensed abdominal muscles absorbed most of the blow, but the force still left him reeling. He struck with a quick right. His fist bounced off the glass globe. "Pretty solid stuff. I can't tell you how many windows I've broken without even trying, and not a crack!"

The head within the globe made no reply. Its brow was furrowed in intense concentration as the spider-body continued to assault Avery with a series of pummeling kicks. He ducked and weaved, dodging the blows with grace, but he was tiring, and he knew it.

"Time to end this." Avery rolled backwards and came up in a kneeling position with his revolver in his hands. He fired twice, and the arachnine jolted with the impact. The moonlight revealed the bullets splattered on the globe. "By Jove," he said, astounded, and a leg knocked him on his back.

The arachnine jumped on him, claws slashing at his face. He defended himself with a raised arm; the claws sliced it open. But with the bulk of the machine pinning him to the earth, he had an unimpeded view of the bottom of the cylinder. Running across it was a looped rubber tube. Avery seized it with his free hand and pulled. The sinews on his arms stood out like steel cables.

With a shower of stinging sparks the tube came free. Avery shoved with his remaining strength, and the arachnine fell back, rolling in the grass, legs kicking furiously. Avery grabbed one appendage with both hands and twisted. It snapped off with a satisfying sound of rending metal. He raised the leg, poised like a batsman, and delivered a stunning blow with all his might. It would have crushed a human skull to powder. The head bounced in the dome, jerking on its tether of tubes and wires, a few of which came loose. The thick eyelids lowered. The monstrosity kicked its last.

"I'm sorry, old chap," Avery said, but he did not know whether or not that was true.

With a running start he had no great difficulty in scaling the wall. He paused for a moment at the top; within the compound was a scene even more infernal than that within the volcanic crater. The factory entrance glowed with a hellish light; the

whir and clank of machinery filled his ears and the fulsome fumes filled his lungs. But somewhere in there James was suffering.

He slipped into the courtyard without a sound.

“I can’t seem to think of a single thing to say,” Avery said. “By Gad, I’m positively speechless.”

“What? What?” James asked. “What’s happened to me?”

“I wish I could explain,” Avery said. “But I’m dumbstruck, absolutely dumbstruck, Jim. My lips are frozen in disbelief.”

“Shut up, you nit,” James snapped. “You’re talking nonsense. Now tell me what’s happened.”

“There’s no easy way to say this. Your head has been severed and placed in a jar.” Avery averted his eyes. “Actually, that was simplicity itself.”

“I must have been enmechanized,” James said, aware now of the metallic tone of his own voice.

“Not fully. They haven’t hooked you up to one of those spider-bodies. You’re just floating in a jar, like a pickled egg. By Jove, I could go for a half-dozen of those right now.”

“Focus your attention, buffoon! What a delightful situation, that one of the world’s greatest minds should be at the mercy of a doddering ape like yourself.”

“Sorry,” Avery mumbled. “No need to speak that way.”

“I apologize. Perhaps I’m irritable because *my head has been cut off*. Look around for my corpus, there’s a lad.”

“My guess is this trail of blood indicates the path along which it was recently dragged. What’s beyond this door?”

“Some corridors... I’m afraid I didn’t observe much on my entry. I was preoccupied by the prospect of having my head cut off. Does your mode of ingress permit further exploration of this facility?”

“I can surely see,” Avery said, and, leaping upward, he pulled his lithe body back into the shaft. A moment later he reappeared. “That’s not going to work, I’m afraid; it’s just the one shaft to the outdoors. But I believe I know where they’ve taken your body. You recall that pit?”

“Of course. Their dumping ground. I believe,” James said, looking around the room, “that some of this machinery is sufficiently advanced, Mr. Dawes, that if we were to recover my errant flesh, I could direct you through the recapitulation process.”

“That’s the spirit!” Avery cried. “We’ll have you waltzing in no time!”

“I never waltz.” James had scarcely finished the sentence when Avery snatched his globe from the cradle on which it sat. He thrust it into the shaft above and followed it seconds later. Avery crawled through the passage, rolling James ahead with one hand. They came to the opening through which Avery had originally entered the building; he carefully removed it and peeked into the courtyard below.

“Looks like clear sailing,” he said. He tossed James to the brown grass, then followed him, eyes combing their surroundings. A split-second later the ground before his feet erupted in flame. An arachnine crawled toward them. On the fore of its chassis was a small tube, at the mouth of which flickered a small pilot flame. A dragon-tongue of fire jettied forth, and Avery barely ducked under it. “No time for you, old chap,” he said, and bounded toward the arachnine. It skittered backward, trying to bring the flame-weapon to bear, but Avery denied it its aim, ducking and weaving as he had learned in the boxing ring. When he had closed the gap, he leapt directly at the machine, bouncing off its crooked leg with one foot, then from its dome with the other, and with one smooth motion he slipped over the wall. He hit the ground running, James’s head tucked under his arm like a rugby ball.

“Set a course for the bone-pit,” James said. “Recovering my body should be our top priority. Then we can see about setting these fiends straight.”

“Right-o,” Avery said cheerfully. His spirits were up. The odds were much against them. Their

enemies were strong, well-armed, and numerous; James was much reduced; Avery was rattled with fatigue and a dozen injuries; but he knew his enemy at least, and now the battle could begin in earnest.

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They found James's body easily enough, albeit in a rather worn state. Being dragged through the jungle had not improved it, and most of the blood had leaked out. "Still," James said, "it's what I've got to work with. I'm rather surprised at the nostalgia I feel for that old bag of bones." Avery hauled it out by a braided rope of vines. "Now we find ourselves operating within a strict time limit," James said. "We haven't much time before the flesh is completely moribund."

"We could pack it in salt," Avery suggested. "I think I saw a marshy area from the top of the mountain."

"Alas, that would merely pickle my corpse – handy for preserving it for future consumption alongside a pint of lager, but less suitable for our intended purpose. In this tropical climate, it must putrefy quickly if we find no solution."

Avery rested his chin on his fist in a deliberate effort at cogitation. "I think I've got it!" he cried. "What's the word you gents use? Eureka?"

"Yes, that's correct, although 'Heureka' is closer to the Greek for 'I've found it!' or, literally, 'I am in a state of having found it!' I prefer to pronounce the word as the original 'Eypka!', but I understand I am in the minority on that point – where are we going?" Avery had gathered James, head and all, and was loping up the mountainside.

"This mountain is volcanic, yes, but the vent is only halfway up, and the rest appears to be properly chilly. When I went salmon fishing in Norway, as our catch accumulated, we just stuck the fish in snow banks, and they'd stay fresh until we were ready to eat them. Thus – eureka!" He pointed upwards – a few thousand feet above them was the fringe of the snowy top of the mountain.

"By Gad!" James cried. "Good work, Dawes! ... I can't believe I didn't think of that," he added.

"Perhaps you're feeling distracted by having your head cut off."

"I concede the possibility."

Avery scaled the mountain quickly enough and soon had James's body packed in snow. "That should keep it for a little while."

"It'll have to, as I'm afraid our preparations shall want several days. We would be ready for action sooner, but only one of us is in a fit state to produce any significant quantity of urine."

Avery did not find it necessary to question this statement. "Now what?" he said.

"You recall just last night – how long ago it seems! – when we lay in our banyan and a flock of Chiroptera winged by on their nocturnal hunt – did you spy their origin?"

"I assume you mean the bats, and I did at that, James, old chum! It seems they rose from the mouth of a lava tube at the base of the volcano."

"To the bats, then. As dawn is breaking, they should be returning from their eventide escapades."

Avery picked him up. "I don't jostle you overmuch, do I?"

"On the contrary. I float as gently as a babe in the womb. I doubt very much that I retain the ability to sense pain, at any rate."

"There's that, at least."

"Aye. But a man must stand on his own two feet."

"I don't think you'll find many willing to argue against the idea that full, natural bodies are preferable to – those things."

"Yet, Avery, the arguments presented by their leader Alpha were deeply compelling. God help me, I listened to that madman, enough to discern the glimmer of truth at the base of his madness. And, God help me, I think I understand his reasoning. He was a victim of the Crimea, one of those men forever fractured by war, wounded so sorely that this island and these beings are his reasoned and rational response to the insanity of civilization." James's head floated in a slow revolution. He bit his lip, deep in thought. "He called the *world* mad



– but if quests for meaning, attempts to create structure in this structureless morass lead to such monstrosities as *this*, then what hope have we? Man must do something to persevere against the lunacy and cruelty of the world, yet if *this* is what fruit those efforts yield...”

“Well,” said Avery, “I don’t know about all that, but I do know plenty of chaps who came back from the war all right. It came down to him being tested for all he was worth, and he must have failed. I don’t hate the fellow for his weakness – that would be wrong and show a lack of understanding – but it does sadden me.”

“I disagree,” James said. “That wasn’t his point at all. It wasn’t a snap; he called it a revelation. He truly believes that enmechanization in these clattering marionettes is the answer to human misery. Oh, merciful Zeus, Avery, he intends to spread this gospel abroad! I forgot until now, so preoccupied was I with my own predicament. He intends to ‘liberate’ the citizens of the world from the burden of flesh!”

Avery frowned. He lifted James’s globe so he could look into his eye. “Can he do it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not now – but you’ve seen his technology. It can only wax in power and complexity. And my own example should convince you of his earnestness in sharing his so-called solution.”

Avery sighed. “Now I have to destroy him. As a gentleman, and an Englishman, I cannot allow this monstrosity to survive.”

“You don’t understand, you clod! This perversion of science is the offspring of violence! We must find another solution.”

“I’m all ears.”

James sighed, a raspy wind through his external speaker, and averted his gaze, which involved some effort. “To match your idiom – the well is dipping dry today. Unfortunately, our private exigencies exclude clemency.”

“My thoughts exactly. Believe me, Jim, if there were another way, I’d be all for it. But I understand there is a good deal of satisfaction to be had in

confronting evil and beating the piss out of it. Shall we?”

“With heavy heart – yes, we shall!”

“So what do we do?”

They had arrived at the entrance to the bat cave. The twittering of the rodents reached their ears, as did the heady scent of their dwelling.

“I regret that I cannot share in this part of the task.”

“No worries, Jim! Just tell me what to do.”

“Descend into that cave, scoop out many handfuls of their droppings, then emulsify that manure with as much urine as you can muster. To achieve the fine solution required, you’ll have to stir with your hands. Be careful not to inhale in the course of your work, as the guano contains microscopic creatures capable of engendering bronchitis, typhoid, scrofula, leprosy, scurvy, the gallops, dropsy, cholera, dermal necrosis, tongue rot, and scrofula.”

“You said scrofula twice.”

“There are two kinds of scrofula.”

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After Avery completed his task – after his own well “dipped dry” and he could muster no more urine – he cut a number of slim vines and prepared a few lengths of rope. Then he set to knotting them together, fashioning a crude bridle.

“If we’re going into battle,” he said, “I’ll want a mount. You can’t have a knight without a charger, eh?”

“A bit self-aggrandizing, don’t you think?”

“We’ll see. I’ll get a knighthood someday. It’s happened to less deserving fellows. I’ll be back, my son.” And he strode off into the jungle, leaving James to his thoughts.

Avery made for the watering hole they had passed the previous day. He swung into a banyan and traversed the close-knit branches until he was over the muddy, hoof-marred shore. A herd

of the capybara creatures bustled below him; the wind safely carried his scent away, and they were apparently unaware of his existence. He watched them drink and bawl at one another, and wished he had the equipment and the leisure to bag one or two. One of these heads would raise an eyebrow at the Reform, all right!

But he had bigger game in mind. At a mewled warning, the capybaras galloped as one for the brush, ceding the pond to the rhinoceros.

Until then his plan had been perfect in his mind. He would simply drop from the tree and onto the rhino's back, and subdue it as a wild Indian subdued a mustang. Avery could ride – and had ridden – every type of beast in three continents: green, unbroken stallions, sedate Delhi oxen, bucking Texas broncos. But in the actual presence of the lumbering beast, his plan shattered. Its back was so broad and its hide so thick that it might not even notice his weight. How could he make it heed him? Besides, he had forgotten just how thoroughly the spikes and jagged plating covered it.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, he thought, and threw himself from the branch with a savage yawp.

He might as well have fallen on boulders. The armor plating knocked the wind from him and tore his palms and knees. However, the spikes provided handy grips; he wrapped his arms around them and held on for dear life. The rhino had indeed felt his landing, and it bucked wildly, lurching like the tumultuous earth in a quake. Avery bounced on its back, fighting to regain his breath, and wild glee coursed through him. "Damn your eyes," he whispered, "you'll have to kill me before I let go!"

The rhino took off at a gallop, pounding across the plain, each step knocking the air from Avery as he flapped like a banner in the wind. But still he would not relinquish his grip. "Oh, you don't want to do that," he groaned as the rhino made for the thick trees.

Branches whipped at his face and thorns tugged at his clothes and tore at his skin. The foliage sped by in a blur of green. Avery felt the limits of endurance push on him, and he tightened his grip, confident that he could keep it even into unconsciousness. With satisfaction he realized that the heavy beast

was slowing. It must be unaccustomed to charging, he thought; very likely few predators ever harass it. The rhino ground to a halt with a few lumbering steps. It shook half-heartedly, but still Avery would not be dislodged. When the rhino fell to its knees, panting and foaming at the mouth, Avery crawled along its neck and fixed the bridle in place. He rubbed its head between the ears and made soothing noises.

He dismounted so that the rhino could get a good look at him, then grabbed a low-hanging papaya and offered it to the animal. The rhino took it with cautious skepticism. "We're mates now," Avery said. "Got the charger – one-half of the way to knighthood!"

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At James's direction, Avery continued his saturation of the guano for the next two days. Between saturations, he hunted through the jungle for thick-trunked mahogany trees, and, finding one, he stripped it of branches, then stripped the branches of leaves and carried them back to their makeshift camp. He burned the wood to charcoal and set half aside. The other half he mixed with the guano, which he had allowed to dry in a shallow rock basin, then flushed the whole mixture with water carried in a folded banana leaf. "That will cleanse it of chemical salts and other impurities," James explained. "Now, while you wait for it to dry, ascend to the lava vent and retrieve a handful of brimstone." By the time Avery returned, the tropical heat had sapped the malodorous solution of moisture, leaving a white crystalline powder behind.

"By Jove," Avery said, "that looks just like –"

"Correct!" James said proudly. "Salt of Petra, nitrate of potash, Vesta powder, one part potassium, one part nitrogen, three parts oxygen!"

"Saltpetre!" Avery cried.

"I'd tap my nose if I could," James said. "Now all that remains is to grind the charcoal and sulfur, and mix the three components – very carefully."

Avery stirred the powders with infinite care. Soon he had a good quantity of a dark grey powder. He scooped up a bit on the end of a stick, carried it a good distance away, and threw a lighted match onto

it. He was rewarded with a small bang and flash. "Criminy," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Oh, now I've startled Puck." For so he had named the rhinoceros. He chased after the poor beast and calmed it with a few words.

"Loose powder is inefficacious," James said. "It is known that one must condense the explosion and direct the wave of force if one wishes it to have any significant power."

"Even still," Avery said, "I don't see how it'll be enough to blow down the gates of the compound."

"I never had any intention of that. Let us finish the preparations, and all will be made clear."

Avery found a grove of oaks, and, working with a flint blade he had carved during his few idle hours, he succeeded in hacking off a limb as thick as his thigh. He fixed his blade in the end of a stick, fashioned a bow with a vine and a pliable limb, and thus had a drill, with which, after hours of excruciating work, he hollowed the section of oak, leaving one end closed. After allowing it to dry, he packed it with powder, then sealed it with a plug of bamboo.

"I hope my body's well," James said. "It's been up in the snow for three days."

"I'm sure it's fine," Avery said, too tired to think of anything but the ache in his arms. "At any rate we're ready for action, so I suppose I'll retrieve it." He left James and, on Puck, climbed quickly to where he had left James's body. He was relieved to find it untouched. He loaded it on Puck and returned, scooping up James and his bomb. "Now tell me. After I've expended huge amounts of energy and urine on constructing this little explosive, what exactly are we destroying?"

"Restless at his red-hot forge..." James said with a smile.

"God's wounds, man!" Avery shouted. "You can't be serious!"

"Can't I? It's a perfect plan. We trigger a lava flow. Seeing its approach, the arachnines will prepare to flee the island. We slip in during the chaos, recapitate me, and stow away on whatever vessel of escape they have."

"Nothing could be simpler."

Avery pulled Puck to a stop near the lip of the vent. He tucked the bomb under his arm and looked for a handy crevice in which to stick it. "One difficulty, old boy," he said.

"What's that?"

"We neglected to make a fuse."

James uttered a cry of regret. "I can't believe that! My poor body's thawing. We don't have the time to prepare one now!"

"I'm afraid I dozed during my Eton days – what's the story of Alexander the Great and that bloody knot?"

"The Gordian knot? It's an object lesson in solving insoluble problems with a single bold stroke. My God, man!" James shouted, as Avery reared back and hurled the bomb as high as he could. It hung in the air for a moment before splashing into the lava; an explosion sounded immediately, spraying rocks and orange-red lava everywhere. Avery ran for Puck, who was shying away, mounted in a running leap, and spurred the beast downhill. The mountain roared, the earth heaved, coconuts showered to the ground. Bits of lava fell hissing around them – a dollop landed on Puck's flank, and he bellowed and galloped all the faster. The compound drew into sight before them.

"Look," James said. The animals, sensing the eruption, were swarming from their jungle and toward the furthestmost point of the island, the beach where the compound was. Puck thundered through a herd of stampeding capybara; James spotted a slender gazelle-like creature, and, in the trees to their right, Avery was certain he saw the sinuous shape of their serpent. Behind them the jungle burned, and bitter smoke filled the air.

Before them, the walls of the compound swarmed with arachnines. The animals, including a few of the armored rhinoceroses, were pounding at the gates in their mad desire to escape the onrushing lava, and the arachnines were beating them back. At the far side of the compound, Avery saw a rising amorphous bubble – a balloon taking in air. "We haven't much time," he shouted over the cacophony



of bleating animals and pounding hooves.

They reached the gates just as the collective weight of the fauna bore them down with a fantastic crash, crushing capybara and arachnines alike under its bulk. The animals flooded in. The arachnines stood in their path, flailing with their powerful limbs, chanting their mantra: "You have no need to fear. You have no need to fear." James recognized Mu, one of the arachnines that had enmechanized him, bracing itself against the onrush of the great serpent. The snake encircled the arachnine, who attacked with claws and a whirling blade, both glancing off the snake's impervious scales. One constriction of the mighty coils, and the arachnine fell, limbs crimped and crumpled, the globe shattered and leaking. The snake slithered to the next arachnine.

"That satisfies my long-held desire to see a giant snake fight a spider-machine man," Avery mused, as he hauled on the reins, directing Puck toward the building that housed the recapitulation equipment. Puck hammered down the doors with his powerful horn, and Avery dismounted, snatching James and throwing the body over his shoulder. "So long, boyo," he said, patting Puck on his spiky cheek, and he dashed away before Puck could see the manly tears rimming his eyes.

Avery dropped the body into the chair beneath the recapitulation machine and strapped it into place. "Why would they even have this thing?" he wondered.

"In case they changed their minds. In case of a mistake. Maybe Alpha, consumed with his own vanity, built it just to prove recapitulation is possible. I honestly don't care. Just put my globe up there. Good. Now let me talk you through the procedure. I've seen it done – in reverse – and I'm sure it's fairly simple."

"If not," Avery said, "I've got a good place for you on my shelf, between my globe of the world and my complete Dickens."

"You read Dickens?"

"No. But the books look so handsome, I'm sure I will someday."

Avery arranged the hoses trailing from the globe as James directed him. The whole machine looked

very doubtful to him, but when he threw the large switch on the opposite wall, the flurry of blades and automatic needles reassured him. Certainly the machine was doing *something*. With a hiss the bottom of the globe opened, the straps released, and James slumped to the floor, head and all.

"Tell me you're well, mate!" Avery said, helping him up. James coughed, twisted his neck, and rubbed it with one hand.

"I'll have to wear high collars for a while," he said. He had a fine incision, a perfectly straight line, now stitched very finely, around the circumference of his neck.

"It's very elegant. How do you feel?"

"Numb. I can move my limbs only with difficulty. No doubt my lymph needs replenishment, and my humors are low. Pardon me if I'm a bit choleric for a while."

"I would be too! But as I'm sanguine for the nonce, I suggest we dash."

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Most of the arachnines were involved in the struggle against the animals. Avery had the satisfaction of seeing Puck acquit himself against two arachnines; he crushed one underfoot, then rammed another with his horn and lifted it into the air while its legs kicked wildly. "Hail, hail!" Avery cried, pumping his fist in the air.

They made for the balloon, now visible over the buildings. It was taut and ready to lift off. Beneath it was a very small basket, hardly enough room for one, let alone two. Avery levered James, still half-numb, into the basket. He lifted the basket from the ground, nudging it into the air. It lifted slowly, then strained at the tether, wanting to leap into the air. Avery wrapped the rope around his right hand and severed it at the base with his penknife. Instantly the balloon shot into the air and Avery soared over the rooftops. On the side of the volcano a bright orange river carved a flaming path through the vegetation. Soon it would drown the compound.

Arachnines paused in their fighting to watch them float away. "King and Country!" he screamed joyfully, and filling his lungs, he boomed in his fine

baritone:

*When Britain first, at Heaven's command  
Arose from out the azure main;  
This was the charter of the land,  
And guardian angels sung this strain:  
"Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:  
"Britons never will be slaves."*

That was the only verse he knew, which was just as well, for then the balloon gave a sudden lurch that sent him swinging at the end of his rope. On the opposite side of the basket, he saw, was an arachnine, bigger and grander than any he had seen before, dangling from another rope that had escaped his notice. The head within the globe was tremendous, fierce and scowling. Inch by inch it crawled up the rope toward the basket.

Avery twisted in the wind, attempting to control the direction of the swing. By great exertion he was able to at least stop his wild movements. He kicked his legs out, then back, then out again, slowly gaining momentum. The slimmest chance – if he missed by an inch, he'd crash to the sea, now a hundred feet below.

He let go of the rope and flew for a few feet. The other cord whipped him in the face; he sailed past it; he caught it; the basket pitched above him and he saw James scrambling for a handhold. The arachnine below him struck upwards with its forelegs, raking his face with its claws. Avery grunted. His penknife came out and he sawed at the rope.

"Why must this end in death?" the arachnine said. "I was a doctor. All my years I sought only to foil the enemies of life." Avery only heard half of this last sentence, for the rope frayed under the arachnine's great weight and sent it plunging to the sea. The splash was minute.

Avery hauled himself aboard and lay panting in the basket. "That was Alpha," James said solemnly. "Their leader. Not a good man, but perhaps a great one."

"He can be great amongst the fishes now."

"Uncharitable of you."

Avery shrugged. "I've got more cuts than Caesar. I don't feel charitable."

"What I'm wondering," James said, "is why this was their escape craft. They couldn't have fit more than one arachnine in this basket. Hello, what's this?" He picked at the bottom of the basket. Beneath the bamboo weave was a flat piece of wood. James tugged at it until he removed a long, flat case, closed by a clasp. He opened it. Within were papers – drawings, diagrams covered with figures and symbols Avery could scarcely comprehend, and pages of notes in a tight hand. "It's their secrets – how to build the chassis, how to remove a man's head without causing permanent death, and attach it again – the composition of the preserving fluid. Alpha never planned to escape in case of an eruption. He just wanted his knowledge to survive. By God, Avery, do you realize what this means? This knowledge could change the world. We could defeat death – extend lives indefinitely. Alpha's science was sound, if his motives and intentions were less so."

"Throw it overboard," Avery said.

"I can't, Avery. I'm a man of science. The knowledge here is far too valuable to discard."

"Did you enjoy living in a jar?"

"Of course not – but a victim of terminal illness–"

"Is better off dead than living as one of those things. There are more important parts of living than your number of years. By God, James, there are limits to what we're meant to know, to what we can conscionably do with God's creation. Alpha wrought abomination, not progress."

James considered this.

"Besides," Avery said, "imagine the fame you'd garner for those discoveries. Do you really want to earn renown for *someone else's work*?"

"That's so," James said, and flung the case into the ocean. "That's the only reason. Don't think for a moment that I believe in any sort of limit to man's scientific knowledge. It is my vanity that caused that spurious movement – which I already regret – not any facetious dread of runaway science without conscience. Oh, no. Mankind can't have too much of that. Bring on the death-rays, the poison-spewers, the bombs that can atomify entire cities! Excelsior, dear Avery, upward and onward!"

# Can Hammer ever rise from the grave?

**So that's the latest news:** Hammer are back in production. Their new film will be released on the net and it's called *Beyond the Rave* (tagline: "All they wanted was a night to remember"). But the big question is: will it give Hammer horror a new lease of life or drive a stake finally through its heart?

My writing life has brushed with Hammer on a number of occasions. Let me count the ways.

First and foremost my first produced screenplay, *Gothic*, was inspired by David Pirie's seminal book on the English gothic cinema, recently republished in an updated version as "A New Heritage of Horror." This is the book that, in the seventies, rehabilitated Terence Fisher as a director of class, and more importantly stressed that the disease of social realism was not, actually, the only furrow British cinema could plough. It told me Christopher Lee's *Dracula* hearkened back to Lord Byron and that Hammer was born out of a great and noble literary tradition. It's a great book and, please, read it if you haven't.

Of course by the time I was writing *Gothic*, Hammer had gone the way of all flesh and the time of even *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires* (its nadir, surely) had passed. Some might say (as Pirie does) that since the departure of Anthony Hinds the studio's quality of output was on an inevitable decline. And didn't we all know when someone called "Roy Skeggs" was put in charge (an accountant, I believe), Hammer must be surely doomed?

Cut to many years later, when my vampire movie *Octane* is in development. The producer at one stage was thinking of getting into bed with a financial whiz-kid who was intent to re-launch Hammer: the implication being, *Octane* would be their first outing. These were early talks and I had no idea how much bullshit was being spun, but the producer asked me how I felt about resurrecting the Hammer brand, and I said "I don't know." I said I

AUTHOR: Stephen Volk

was a massive fan of the company, the films were a formative influence on my writing, but I honestly didn't know about the wisdom of bringing back a brand name that now had so many associations of camp and parody. It's easy to see how marketing people can latch onto "name recognition" – but what's in a name? This particular name? Would it be a gift or an encumbrance? I for one wasn't sure. I said the only way to do it is to make a fucking great modern horror film that just happens to have the label "Hammer" on it, and take it from there.

Anyway the financial guy didn't do what he said. The Hammer deal evaporated. And anyway, his idea of a cool new way to update Hammer was "Dracula on an airliner." So God help us.

I've similarly been asked over the years what I think of remaking *Don't Look Now*, or *The Wicker Man*. Same reaction: an initial quickening of the heart, like you might have the chance to kiss your favourite actress, then you think: why? Am I just going to be fucking with the past here? Is this just going to be necrophilia?

Worst case scenario: could the "New" Hammer go the way of *Carry on Columbus*, the dire and desperately unfunny attempt to drag the "Carry On" franchise kicking and screaming into the modern world long after the concept should have been put out to pasture or given the vet's needle?

A few years ago my agent set up another meeting with another bloke who was going to resurrect Hammer. He and I went for coffee and he said they were going to put on stage shows based on Hammer films at the Finsbury Park Empire, with top Las Vegas type special effects. He thought that was a winning formula. Diplomatically, I decided not to say what I thought.

Latest thing is, this year I hear the BBC are planning to do a series of one hour "Hammer



films” on Saturday night. I pitched one idea, which the BBC producer seemed to like. Then the brief changed. The commissioning editors didn’t want Hammer in the sense we all know and love: they wanted it jazzed up, contemporized, busty women, set in the future, whatever. I think they were off on one after their recent (execrable) Jekyll, but then again I now take it as a given that TV people know and care as much about horror as Richard Dawkins cares about the Vatican. Anyhow the new brief was rubbish so I said no. Who knows if we’ll see Hammer on Saturday nights on BBC1? Do I really care?

The thing is, all this is about, to them - as I said before - is name recognition. Hammer is a name people think they can squeeze just a little bit more dosh out of, like Mr Creosote wanting that last waffer-thin mint. Apparently BBC Drama now will only consider adaptations of novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Sense & Sensibility* that the audience already know about and have even, get this, seen before. They will not consider Stephen Gallagher’s passion to adapt *Castle of Otranto*, for instance. They said “Give us another *Dracula* instead.” Which he did, and they turned it down without reading it. (Long story. Ask him.)

Hammer is in my DNA. It’s deep in the DNA of any Brit who loves horror, probably. It’s us. I’m not so much of a purist I want to preserve Cushing and Lee in aspic: I’m too much of an iconoclast for that. But I certainly won’t have my memories of some great, crude perhaps, but heartfelt, culturally resonant movies bruised by some modern tosh.

The great monsters will survive. The great moments, too, like Cushing holding up the candlesticks in the shape of the cross; the pentagram battle in *The Devil Rides Out*; the disintegration of She; the shock beheading in *The Vampire Lovers*; the dissection of the Martian grasshoppers in *Quatermass and the Pit*.

I wish the new guys well. I really do. I hope, in spite of the inexcusably awful pun in the title, *Beyond the Rave* is a success and goes on to spawn others. But, irrespective of that, Hammer – meaning the films that excited me many years ago, and still do – will never die.

## Innocent

**I should never** have called her Josephine. It's too adult a name for a child. It is ripe with sensuality, knowing and corruption. When she was a baby, cradled in my arms, twitching her body in preparation for movement, it seemed delightful to have given her such an old name. She had grave, dark eyes and it suited her. She was a toy doll with the eyes of a libertine. It was amusing. I suppose that I thought her eyes would change at some point.

They didn't though. She learned to crawl and then to walk. She learned to smile and then to talk. And always her grave black eyes taunted and tempted. By the time she was two, Josephine had become obscene. I had no idea how beautiful she would be. No-one will know how lovely she may have become.

All mothers think their children are beautiful and I had thought so of my three others. I still do; they are charming, engaging children that I love purely. Andrew shone with energy and intelligence; he was our first and so special. Emma was a golden angel, ethereally pretty, and Robert was breathtaking in his grace. They were all in school when Josephine was born. She was a surprise, in so many ways. Her beauty was different. She had the beauty of a vamp; she was earthy, animal promise. This was no abstract, innocent prettiness, but voluptuous sensuality. She was blonde and pale, like her sister, and looked like Emma had at that age. Looking at Josephine was seeing Emma in a mirror of corruption. Emma's shining hazel eyes made grave and dark; Emma's sweet mouth twisted with depravity. A fallen angel.

Women would stare at her when we went to toddler groups. I tried not to go to the same one two weeks running. There were about half a dozen that I would go between. With the other children, I had enjoyed the company of the mothers but with Josephine I couldn't bear the looks. In their eyes there was a mixture of desire and disgust that I felt myself and I hated to have it reflected back to me. I would tell myself that I loved her, cleanly, purely, as a mother, as I loved my older children. But in the secret stolen moments that I could call my own, and for the first time was glad were so infrequent, I would look at my beautiful daughter with her hint of corruption and desire her and be disgusted.

AUTHOR: Victoria Snelling

I disliked her because I saw in her the seed of corruption. I looked at her knowing eyes and rolled her name around my tongue. Josephine. I had given my child a whore's name. She had only been alive four months by the time we were exclusively calling her Josie. It was possible that the name was innocent and it only became ruined when it was attached to her. She had that effect on things, and people. By the time I realised that I already blamed her name.

Josephine clung to her. She preferred it. When people first heard it they would sigh it out with dread comprehension. Their breath would settle around her, laden with desire. She would smile her coy, lewd half-smile and look up, seductive, knowing. As if she already knew what you wanted to do. The first swell of lust is quickly followed by revulsion and fear. I met no-one who was not deeply disturbed by my toddler's carnal beauty and I met no-one who did not hate her for it.

How can the features and manner of one tiny child evoke such a response? It is taboo, utterly wrong and it sickens me. I have other children and never felt this way. I have suckled them, cleaned them, clothed them, bathed them with pure maternal love. I had nothing but bewildered contempt for anyone who might find these little beings sexual. Even when they became aware of themselves, even when they played with themselves, it left me cold. They still do. As they should.

And then there was Josephine. I'm not sure when it first happened. Perhaps it grew gradually over time. It was maybe a year before her beauty became astonishing. And maybe another before I realised how fleshly she had become. I would look at pictures of her and wonder if this temptress was truly my daughter.

My husband, Greg, didn't help me with Josephine. With Andrew, Emma and Robert he had been very involved. He bathed them, fed them, played with them, read to them. He is a model father to all but his youngest child. I noticed early on that he

didn't like to look at her and I thought I knew why. We've never talked about it and I didn't insist. It seemed better that I should be the only one to do these things. When she climbed on his knee for a cuddle I saw how ill at ease he was, how he was uncomfortable putting his hands on her body, how he moved her away as soon as he could.

We called her Josie exclusively after only four months. Perhaps I knew then. Perhaps it took me that long to acknowledge what I felt. Perhaps it took that long to name what I felt.

It was torment to bathe her, to clothe her, to touch her and pretend it was innocent. To believe she was innocent. But I couldn't let anyone else do it. I was too afraid of others' lack of control. If I, her mother, who had never harmed one of her children, had never conceived the possibility of abuse, of even a physical nature much less sexual, could barely restrain myself around her fleshly, earthy presence, what chance did anyone else have?

I dreaded gifts of clothes. A vest and shorts, androgynous and plain on other children, became slutty on her. It is fashionable to dress children as miniature adults. The adult she became in embroidered jeans and a fur-trimmed jacket was stickily ripe. This future woman had tasted everything and smeared the juices over her body. She had joyfully slipped into depravity. She was lewd and lascivious and rejoiced in every moment. I hated her for the experiences I had never had and never known I wanted until I saw my three year old in a metallic blue, sequined Stetson.

I took my desire and my disgust and put it away in a box. I never discussed it. I wonder if things would have turned out differently if I'd talked to someone then, a professional, about what I felt. Now I have no choice. At the time, I was too ashamed. What would I have said? Would I have told someone that relations between Greg and I had changed since Josephine had come along. We had never been particularly adventurous sexually and that suited us both. We were tender and loving and gentle. Josephine changed that. We started to experiment and as she grew older our games grew darker.

Maybe I thought she would grow less beautiful, maybe I thought her beauty would become cleaner. Nobody said anything to me about it.

With my older children I worried that they would be snatched. Of course I had. They are adorable. Who wouldn't want them? But I worried in an abstract way.

It was only with Josephine that I began to imagine what might be done to her. I told myself it was normal to picture this child naked and tormented, subject to depredations I would never consent to myself. And always with her grave black eyes and half-smile. This over-ripe plum could not be corrupted. She was born corrupt. Josephine. I cursed you with a whore's name; a name that becomes a groan, an expulsion of pent up air, a release of tension I didn't know I was holding. Her name was a moment of ecstasy that should be tender, intimate but became dirty, obscene.

When she was four we went on holiday. I didn't want to go to Spain. Greg insisted. We hadn't had a holiday since Josephine had been born. I was agitated by the thought of her carnality in a swimsuit, but we needed a break. Perhaps I thought after all, that two weeks away in the sun would be a tonic. The resort was child-friendly and our friends were all going. Maybe I thought that seeing her amongst other children would reduce my fears. Maybe I had simply seen something once and been unable to see anything else. Perhaps my fevered imagination had made more of my daughter's corruption than was really there.

I was so wrong. To see my beautiful plum running and playing on the beach with her siblings, with the other children, was torture. My body hummed in response to her. I felt it in my breasts and groin and it sickened me. I saw other parent's notice her, be absorbed by her and forget their own. I saw Spanish women make the sign of the cross, as if her carnality could only have come from the devil. She was like a child. She was innocent and carefree and playful. Until she turned her grave eyes upon you and then she and you were lost.

Through all this, I cannot say that my daughter behaved with awareness, that she did anything wrong, that she in any way acted differently than any other child. What people see, what I see, is read by us and not written by her. We see sensuality, corruption and carnality and who is to say it is there? The only thing that kept me from believing it was only my fault, my twisted sickness, was that I saw it in everyone around me. In the possessive,



obsessive eyes of other mothers, in the open-mouthed shock of adolescent boys we passed in the street, in the towels dragged across the laps of the fathers on the beach, I knew my rotten, depraved daughter aroused others as she aroused me.

She wore a pink sun hat with yellow flowers. I saw the same hat on a few other little girls while we were on the beach. They looked adorable. They looked cute and protected from the sun. I watched them play and laughed with joy. On Josephine's harlot head the hat said, 'strip me, fuck me'. It topped her tiny body, pale skin slick with sun cream, mimicking more natural fluids, sticky and suckable like an over-ripe plum, and an innocent sunhat was perverted because she wore it.

For a time I had put her to bed in long, white, Victorian style nightdresses. They buttoned at the neck and covered her to her wrists and ankles. It was supposed to be demure. I thought chaste nightwear might make her look more innocent. Emma had worn them and looked a picture of angelic grace. Then I saw Josephine stand on the bottom stair, her tiny white hand caressing the shiny wooden finial at the end of the banister, looking at me with her grave dark eyes, half-smiling as if she knew what I had tried to do and knowingly thwarted me. Her dirty beauty sullied the nightdress. Her voluptuousness made it seem a sordid dressing up game. A debauchee dressed up as an ingénue, licking her lips at the thought of the unspeakable acts she might force you to force upon her. We went back to Bratz pyjamas. Their superficial sexuality was the most innocent game on my bruised plum.

Greg was wrong: the holiday was not what we needed. It was the worst thing we could have done. We watched our friends with their children, playing with our children. I saw how the games that involved Josephine seemed furtive as if they were doing things they didn't want the grownups to know about. I spent less time with her. Not all of our friends had children so there were more adults than children and everyone pitched in to help. A little distance changed how I felt. Freed from the cloying, decaying presence of my youngest daughter, the balance between desire and disgust shifted.

I became angry. This one person had affected everything in my life. I hadn't gone back to work

because I dare not leave her with anyone. Greg hadn't said anything; he just did more overtime. Our relationship with each other changed. Physically, we couldn't get enough of each other; the needy, desperate, dirty sex was compulsive. Shame drove a wedge between us. He was tired from working and I was tired from childcare. We fucked without eye contact and barely spoke.

We both tried so hard with the other children, Andrew and Emma were on the cusp of adolescence when we went to Spain and they needed us. I would look at them and marvel that they were so grownup in some ways, yet neither of them had lost any innocence or become less pure. It gave me hope that there were some things that Josephine couldn't corrupt. I insisted that Josephine had a room of her own. It meant we had to have a bigger house, and to afford that, we had to live in a poorer area. The schools weren't as good as they would have been if Emma could have shared a room with Josephine. I couldn't bear the thought that Josephine might make her sister as rotten as her. So we all sacrificed.

In the resort villa, Emma and Josephine had to share a room. They were excited, Greg was nervous and I was frantic. The only other option was to have her in the same room as us but we both knew that wasn't possible. There was no way we could go two weeks without sex, not since Josephine had been born, and neither of us wanted the chance that she would see what we did. I listened to my friends complain that they haven't the time or energy for sex. When you hit your forties it seems as if everyone runs out of steam whether they have children or not. But Greg and I found time, in the depths of the night when the children were asleep and the door was locked.

We left the children at night for dinner. They weren't far away and we all took turns to check them. We weren't the only ones to do so. The first night we'd left them I was fraught. My stomach was so tight I could barely eat. There was nothing I could say to explain without touching on what I was really worried about. After all, Andrew and Emma were twelve and eleven. They knew not to be caught out of bed and they knew how to get us if anything were wrong. I dreaded going back to the villa, frightened of what I might find, the things I thought Josephine would do the others. But nothing happened. They slept. They were exhausted from swimming and running on the beach and they

fell asleep straight away.

After that night, my friend Claire offered me sedatives. She suffered with her nerves and thought they might help me. She always had many more than she needed, just in case.

“You need a blow out.” She said. “You’re so tense. These will help.”

Now I think about it, she probably meant that I should take them. I gave them to Josephine. If I could be sure that she was asleep I could relax a little. Part of me felt that just proximity to Josephine could corrupt. So far my angels had been immune but now Emma was sharing a room with her. I’ve no idea what I thought she would do and no evidence on the part of Josephine that she would do anything except be a normal child, but I feared for my daughter.

My husband went to check the next time. He returned concerned. Andrew, the eldest, he was sure had been in the girls’ room. He said Josie, stumbled over the impulse to sigh Josephine. I saw desire and disgust mashed in his eyes. He was sure it was innocent and Andrew had scrambled back to his room as his father had come into the villa. I wanted to check again but feared what I might find. The minutes dragged painfully, pulled like a rope through my hands.

I walked the few steps to our cabin heavily. Oh how I hated what she had made. I had withdrawn from my three pure, innocent babies, frightened by her sensuality. I hated the images that flickered through my mind, those grave eyes, the smile that half-licked the lips, the sticky rotting flesh of my over-ripe plum smeared on the virginal flesh of her brother. I hated the thought that she might cause me to see my other precious babies in the way I saw her.

The villa was quiet and dark when I pushed open the door. The soft snuffling indicated sleep. I checked the boys’ room first. Andrew and Robert were sleeping open mouthed and twisted up in the sheets. They looked like snoozing angels. I pulled the sheets from Andrew’s legs and smoothed it over him, then did the same for Robert. Neither woke, but Robert clutched his toy rabbit closer to his chest. I closed the door behind me, gently, and rested my forehead on the cool wood veneer.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the tears of relief and swallowed down the sick fear for my girl, Emma, alone in a room with Josephine.

The door to the girls’ room was a couple of steps down the corridor. I had taken my shoes off when I came into the villa so as not to clatter my heels on the marble floor. It was cold under my bare feet. Swallowing the hard, jagged lump in my throat I pushed the handle down and opened the door. Cool, peaceful darkness greeted me. The light rhythmic breathing of sleeping children was audible over the noise of diners at the poolside restaurant. Relief can be an unpleasant feeling. It choked me, stabbing at my throat and burning my eyes with unshed tears.

After a moment, I crossed to Emma’s bed. A shaft of light fell across her pillow where the curtain didn’t quite cover the edge of the window. Her pale blond hair splashed across the white linen and her arms were thrown wide. I knelt by the bed and gently kissed her forehead. A noise like a sob drew my attention to the other bed. Josephine. Now she’s gone, she’ll always be Josephine. She was never Josie; that was only the desperate hope I harboured that this could have turned out well, that things could have been different if she hadn’t had that name. I hoped I might never have to tell this story.

I looked from my perfect angel to my other daughter. She lay on her side facing me, the thin sheet pulled up around her shoulders, tiny hands clutching it up to her face. Her eyes were half closed with sleepiness.

“Mummy?”

Still on my knees I crossed to her bed and with one finger, brushed her fringe from her eyes. “Go to sleep.” I whispered. With her eyelids heavy from the sedative I felt almost tender towards her.

“Can I have a drink?” she said.

I looked at the empty glass on the nightstand between the two beds. I smiled and picked it up.

Sitting here, in this featureless room with plastic tables and chairs eerily like the ones in the villa’s kitchen diner, I don’t remember what was on my mind as I walked out of the room. It was a terrible blankness as if my conscious mind wanted nothing to do with what was going to happen. Yet, I can’t

say I had no control, that I couldn't have stopped myself, that it wasn't deliberate. I took the little baggie of sedative from the high cupboard in the kitchen. There was enough for the rest of the week. I tipped all the pills into the mortar and ground them to dust. Normally I give the children water in the night, but I chose to give Josephine juice. She liked apple. I stirred and stirred until the grainy white powder dissolved and carried the glass back to Josephine.

She had drifted back into sleep. I had to wake her up. It is this one thing that means I can't pretend I did this by mistake or I didn't know what I was doing. I stacked the pillows against the headboard and lifted her under her arms so that she was sat up against them. She obediently took the glass and drank. She must have been thirsty because even though she pulled a face at the taste she drank most of the glass straight down. I might have left it at that, but when she handed the glass back to me, she opened her eyes and looked directly at me. I saw my guilt reflected back at me and told her to finish the drink. She did. I suppose I should have felt bad.

Returning to my husband and friends, I felt tired, but light. As I sat down, I caught Greg's gaze across the table. I smiled and for the first time in four years I loved him. The wine tasted sweeter in my mouth and people seemed brighter, their laughter like crystals chiming in a soft breeze. The next forty five minutes flashed by and soon it was time to go check on the children again. This time the knot in my stomach was excitement.

She wasn't breathing. She looked like she had been strangled and if you put your fingers to her throat there was no pulse. I checked the others briefly. They were fine; nothing could hurt them now. I knew I had to put on a show and act the distressed mother. I stood there for a few moments savouring my freedom and then I imagined it had been Emma lying still and cold in the bed. I fuelled my sadness with the pent up anger and fear that Josephine had given me and rushed outside. I screamed and screamed, releasing all the horror I had kept inside since she had been born. I screamed until I had no breath left and then I screamed in silence.

Eventually I was exhausted and sought refuge in my bewildered husband's arms. I saw in his eyes that he knew what had happened and I saw his

relief. For four years he was as shut down as I was. If he hadn't picked up the baggie from the kitchen and put it in his pocket, if he hadn't washed up the mortar and pestle, perhaps our other children would have their father at least. That's what I feel bad about. I should have cleaned up after myself. Then it would only be me locked up and my precious angels would be safe with their father. Even in death, she makes what should have been good into something very wrong.



## Ramsey Campbell

**RAMSEY CAMPBELL's prestigious** writing career began with the publication, by Arkham House in 1964, of his first book *THE INHABITANT OF THE LAKE: AND LESS WELCOME TENANTS*. To the delight of his readers, that career shows no sign of slowing down. His most recent novel, *THE GRIN OF THE DARK* (PS Publishing 2007), has received excellent reviews. A mass market paperback version is due from Virgin Books in May 2008. A new novel, *THIEVING FEAR*, will be published by PS Publishing in March 2008, and Campbell is currently working on his next novel, *CREATURES OF THE POOL*.

He has published numerous short stories; his most recent being *PEEP* in *POSTSCRIPTS 10* (PS Publishing 2007), *DIGGING DEEP* in *PHOBIC* (Comma Press 2007), and *DRAGGED DOWN* in the online magazine *NOCTEM AETERNUS* (2008).



Campbell's work has gained wide acclaim, and he has received many awards for his novels, short stories and edited anthologies. These include several British Fantasy Society awards, and awards from the Horror Writers of America and International Horror Guild. He has a Lifetime Achievement Award

from the Horror Writers' Association, and he received a Grand Master Award at the World Horror Convention in 1999.

So, how much do all these awards mean to him? CAROLINE CALLAGHAN discusses this and other issues with the writer...

**You've received numerous awards and accolades for your writing over the years. How much do these mean to you?**

A lot. They mean that someone out there likes my stuff, whether it's a solitary example or overall. I admit to feeling, whenever I've completed and

**AUTHOR:** Caroline Callaghan

submitted a new piece – especially a novel, given how long one takes – that people are going to decide I've lost whatever I had as a writer, or realise I never had it in the first place. As far as I'm concerned, awards encourage me to carry on. I've read occasional suggestions that old buggers like me should get out of the way of younger writers and declare themselves ineligible for awards. All I can say is I never felt that about, for instance, Fritz Leiber when I was starting out. May the best writers win.

**You were writing and having your work published at an early age. Do you feel you've learnt all there is to learn about writing, or is it something you've continued to improve on and develop throughout your career?**

I've tried. To what extent I've succeeded is up to you and others to say. But Lord knows, I hope I've done better than my early stuff by now. I do think a book like *THE GRIN OF THE DARK* refines some of what I've been doing over the decades. I certainly think that you never stop learning, because unless you write to a formula, every new tale is a new creative task. I do my best not to rely too much on solutions I've previously employed.

**Do you look back with pride on the work you've produced, or do you find you're self-critical of your work with hindsight?**

Self-critical for sure. For example, I find it hard to see past all the flaws in some of the stories in *DEMONS BY DAYLIGHT* to be able to identify anything else in there. On the other hand, I was pleasantly surprised when proofreading the recent edition of *THE FACE THAT MUST DIE* to find that the old thing actually stands up quite well after thirty years.

**Talking of *DEMONS BY DAYLIGHT*, who is Errol Undercliffe, and how much a part of Ramsey Campbell is he?**

He was an author who criticised my early imitative

work – you must decide how much a part of me he was. The other authors published by his publisher and listed in THE FRANKLYN PARAGRAPHS may suggest where I got some of the ideas for him. I'm afraid I thought so little of my tale THE INTERLOPER (rushed through in an afternoon, and it shows) that the only way I could justify to myself including it in the book was by passing it off as one of Errol's tales. He wasn't around to protest, but still...

**You regularly review other people's work in the film/DVD reviews you've done for BBC Radio Merseyside and the magazine VIDEO WATCHDOG. How do you react to other people's reviews of your work?**

As moderately as possible. There's no point in letting bad ones affect you, unless (and it can happen) they show you how you could beneficially change your method. Sometimes, a story can get mutually contradictory reviews. I recall receiving two reviews of SECRET STORY in the course of a day, one singling out the finale for praise, the other condemning it as absurd. Mind you, I can be bothered by a favourable review if it's inaccurate, maybe more than one that's hostile. Ultimately, you get on with writing, whatever the reviews.

**What makes a really good horror story, in your opinion?**

Imagination. Psychological realism. The selection of language. A sense of more than is shown.

**In his introduction to THE GRIN OF THE DARK, Michael Marshall Smith says of you:**

**'The first thing you'd better know is that Ramsey Campbell is disturbing. He may well, in fact, be the most disturbing man there is.'**

**When you write, do you deliberately set out to disturb your reader; to evoke certain responses and emotions in them?**

I stopped actively trying to do that just about twenty-five years ago, while I was writing INCARNATE and decided I was no longer going to tell the reader what to feel (specifically, in the scene where the postage stamps

come to life, an image that seemed both comical and disquieting, and one that I would previously most likely have tried to make more disturbing). All the same, less appears to be more in some cases, and certainly quite a few readers report disquiet while reading THE GRIN OF THE DARK. My ambition is to convey awe, but if I can't achieve that, I'll settle for disquiet. It's an experience I value as an audience myself, whether it's in Thomas Hinde or Beckett or INLAND EMPIRE or LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD. As a writer I think it comes down to giving the material the appropriate weight rather than straining for suspense.

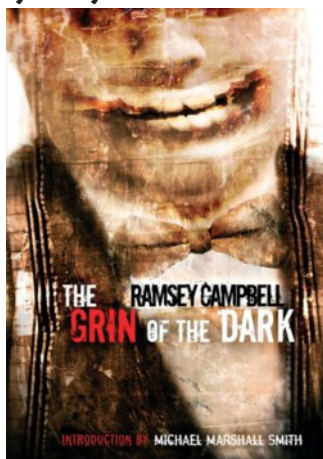
**Looking at the amount of books in bookstores, the science fiction/fantasy genre seems far more popular than horror nowadays. Do you feel horror gets a poor deal?**

It often does, but it never dies. Whenever its funeral is announced, a knocking can be heard from inside the coffin, and no amount of earth or cremation either will prevent it from rising anew. Right now I think the field has pretty well reverted to its state in the fifties, where some of the classics were kept in print, the occasional best seller was visible (especially the wretched Dennis Wheatley), a number of fine books were published without drawing attention to their genre, but otherwise you had to look mainly to the small presses for the best work. I believe all this is one of the natural states of the field, but perhaps it's due for a change.

**You've written extensively, of course; both short stories and novels. Do you have a particular favourite form?**

I like both. Novels do gather a lot of energy from gaining momentum, and from developing material you didn't originally know you were going to write. For that matter, writing a novella – NEEDING GHOSTS – felt like a real liberation and was very exciting, but I haven't had an idea for another yet.

**Two of your novels - THE NAMELESS and PACT OF THE FATHERS - have been made into films in Spain. You had the story idea for a short film (JOYRIDE 1995), and one episode of the TV series THE HUNGER was based on a short story of yours (THE SEDUCTRESS). But, you haven't written**



**specifically for the screen. Is screenwriting something you've deliberately avoided, or would you like to write for TV/film?**

I can't pretend the idea of adapting my own work has ever appealed much to me - if I've already explored the material I'd rather move on to something else. If I ever got an idea that seemed best developed as a script then I'd hope to give it a go.

**Finally, on the subject of TV - in particular, reality TV shows like BIG BROTHER, where people with conflicting personalities/viewpoints are thrown in together - who would you least like to be in the BIG BROTHER house with, and why?**

Smilemime.

[A character in THE GRIN OF THE DARK]

**You can find out more about Ramsey Campbell and his work at:**

<http://www.ramseycampbell.com>

<http://www.myspace.com/smilemime>



# The Resetting Sun

**It was the first time.**

AUTHOR: **Quentin Mark Pierson**

The sun seemed to stand still, but it was falling into the sea.

Yes, it was definitely falling.

He had hoped that time had stopped for him. Made an exception. Perhaps.

But it moved on like clockwork.

The majestic machinery, once set in motion, did not pause. The skies and the heavens. The sun and the moon. And the earth below. All things, all life, ticking away. Miniature mechanisms spinning and revolving.

Like clockwork.

The sun was much lower than it had been before. Sombre and subdued. Its color was a dull red, like that of a dying ember amidst clouds of ash. Its bright, orange glow had long gone and faded.

He had sat there on the beach since the early morning watching the sun rise for the first time in his life, and now he had watched his first sunset. He looked up, and in the swiftly darkening sky he could see small white fireflies gathering and flickering in the sky.

Stars. They were called stars.

They spun across the sky in long arcs. And ruling over them all was a cold, white orb that he had also watched, that had begun its lonely voyage from under the horizon, and then had traveled across the deep emptiness directly above him.

The moon. She was called the moon.

He remained there silently gazing upwards at the heavens deep in thought. Caught in the webwork of her moonlight spell. Lying on the sand. Remembering and recalling the past.

Yet still holding on. Unwilling to let go of the

last, sad images. Buried deep in his fragmented. Scattered mind.

His tears had dried long ago.

1011

"I don't know who you are."

"But darling."

"You never used to call me darling."

"But darl - I mean, Allison. I love you. You're a part of me I can't erase. That I can't let go. I won't let go. I love you. You're the only memory that kept me alive. The only memory that kept me sane. I have loved you since the day I first saw you. And I will love you until the day I die. Darling, please. It's me."

"No!" screamed Allison. She would not give in. "The man I knew, the man I loved is dead. Dead!"

"No. I can't be dead."

1101

The sun had melted into the waters again leaving the world under the watch of his sister. Still the android sat there quietly in the darkness - most of the thoughts that had circled in his head over and over, had simply gone away. Only one question remained unresolved.

"Who am I?"

0111

I had forgotten. Temporarily. While lying in a state of half-sleep, however, it had come back. I wondered, if it were true, what would I choose to remember? What memories would I choose to keep and what memories would I choose to throw away?

But it was really nothing but a mind-game. An

intellectual diversion. In the end, was it nothing but a dream? Sometimes I question my sanity. But even if I knew, it would only be serpent's wisdom. There is only one thing that I know. That I need to know.

0101

I only knew that I loved her. I ran after her gazing at her back. We came out of the dark tunnel and emerged into the light of an artificial, man-made sun.

An artificial sun. Just like me.

I looked around and saw a world that glistened in greys and golds - a city of men and metal.

I was stunned by the beauty of this sight that I must have once seen time and time again, but until now, I had never seen before. I stopped running to take it all into my mind, but Allison just grabbed me by my arm and pulled hard.

She quickly turned her head whipping her wet hair around her face. Her eyes were filled with nervous excitement, pleading me to follow her. I gazed into those eyes transfixed, drinking in the details.

For the first time in my life, I saw her face again.

I loved her.

Her gorgeous bronze-colored skin glowed with life. Her eyes flashed, her cheeks flushed, her lips implored me so full of passion and emotion. I wanted to kiss her there and then, but instead we quickly ran on. I gazed at her lost in a dream as we ran together fleeing.

Fleeing from something.

That I could not recall.

1010

Recall back.

Recall back in time.

Return.

Is this real? Is this you? How do you know that

this is you? That you weren't someone else?

The past? You can't change your past. You can't escape your past. You can't flee from fate. You can't escape destiny.

Lies. All lies.

How do I know that this didn't just happen yesterday, or even just an hour ago? All of my thoughts, all of my dreams, all of my memories could be fake. Programs downloaded into my brain. And I would never be able to tell. I would never be able to tell who I really am or who I once was or who I will be.

My past, present, and future ... the mere whim of the Almighty Programmer.

1110

line 1: print "Hello."

line 2: goto 1

What a joke. An endless loop of echoes. An endless stream of "Hello" calling out, calling out, calling out, but without an answer.

Free will? False will? Environment? Conditioning? Life? Death?

I stared up at the moon.

Hello, hello, who is this?

Who am I?

But she gave no answers.

Here I am. Just watching sand castles fall before the evening tide. Slowly closing the net around everyone. No one is going to escape. No one! Not the android, the humans, the sinners, the saints, the Devil, God, and Nature herself. Doomed to play out the same roles written for them over and over again.

And return.

As sure as the sun rises in the west.

As sure as the outcome of a short story read twice.

What a joke. A miserable joke.

0100

I could barely walk.

I fell like a newborn onto the hard ground. The neural virus had begun to take away my motor functions. My legs were starting to spasm. My arms were starting to quiver. My psycho-immunological defenses tried to eradicate the virus as best as it could from my synaptic programming, but it wasn't working. It had to be a military virus to be able to bypass my advanced defenses, and it was multiplying, mutating, and spreading throughout my system rapidly.

Soon there would be the onset of convulsions. Followed by brain shutdown. And then death.

It was hopeless.

Down in a dank, underground tunnel. Only a few hundred yards away from escape.

But my body systems were dying.

Allison put her arms around me and tried to carry my weight on her shoulders, but my body was too heavy. She slipped on the wet tunnel floor, and we both collapsed to the ground exhausted. I tried to lean myself against the slick walls and drag myself up to my feet, but it was useless. The virus was crippling me. I could barely manage to sit up and just stared at my legs. They felt like dead weights dragging both me and Allison down.

Allison pleaded, "You've got to get up!"

I tried everything that I could to redirect just a little more power into those legs and staggered back up.

I stared at the dull, yellow daylight at the end of the tunnel. I knew that I couldn't make it that far.

Not before they would get us.

I rasped through my failing vocal cords, "Allison. Go without me. It's over. I've tried to hold out as long as I could, but it's useless. This virus is too strong. You have to go before the morners get us both."

Allison shook her head. "No. I can't leave you."

"Allison, you've got to go without me. I'll try to slow them down as much as possible. Please. Go."

"No." Allison put my arm over her shoulders. "We can still make it."

The sound of leaping, padded feet echoed in the darkness behind us. Quick. Relentless. Fearless. Mechanical. Efficient. The sounds that had been hounding us for the past thirty-six hours. But now they were closing in swiftly by the second.

And then I heard the howls.

The eerie wails emitted by the hunting morners right before the kill.

"Run, Allison! Run! Or they'll kill us both!"

"Never! I'm not going to leave you here to die! I'm not going to let them take us. Not when we're so close. We only have to get out of this tunnel, and then we'll be safe!"

"No. The morners will kill us."

Allison looked into my eyes and I saw her fear in them. But it wasn't the morners that she was afraid of.

It was what she was about to do to me.

I whispered fiercely, "Do it Allison! Do it! Don't think about the consequences! You've got to do it! It's the only chance that we've got! Don't worry, I'll never forget you! Never!"

Tears welled from her eyes as she pulled out a grey-black device from her jacket and held it in her hand for a second.

A second too long.

The morners pounced.

There were two of them. One slashed at Allison, knocking the device out of her hand, but I grabbed the morner before it could get her. I raised my fist and smashed the side of its hard ceramic shell cracking it, but the morner turned on me and attacked, slashing into my stomach with its curved



talons. I quickly shut down my pain sensors, grabbed the morner around its neck and crushed its carbon-alloy spine with my bare hands. It quivered briefly, then went still, paralyzed from the neck down.

I let go of it, but the second morner leapt upon me, biting deep with its diamond-edged fangs into the flesh just to the side of my neck. I pulled the monster off of me as it ripped off chunks of my organic muscle and metal circuitry. It instantly sprang at me again, but I managed to knock it away at the last second with a desperate swing of my forearm before it could tear out my throat. In just a few seconds, the first morner had already regenerated its spinal connections and it attacked me from below, severing my leg below the knee with a precise swipe of its bladed claws. I grabbed the beast by the skull as I toppled over and smashed its braincase into the ground.

A sudden scream pierced the air, and I could see Allison cornered by the second morner. She was holding up the retrieved device in her hand with her finger on the trigger. Desperately, I reached out towards her, but I was yanked away. The first one had sunk its teeth into my remaining leg and was dragging me away from her.

I tried to scream, but my lungs did not function.

I could only silently mouth, "Do it, Allison! Do it now!"

The morner crouched in front of her about to strike.

She quickly pointed the device straight at it and pulled the trigger.

It was the last thing I saw as I died.

0001

Darkness.

Ashes.

Dust.

Before time started.

Before everything.

Back before.

I awoke from strange, inchoate dreams floating, all my senses blurred, looking at the light of a ghostly sun. A white spirit hovered over me and said with a mysterious voice.

"Rise."

"And shine."

Suddenly, my senses sharpened. My touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing, and mind came alive as if flicked on by a switch.

I was born.

My first birth.

The Original.

0010

A voice called out to me, "Hello."

"Hello," I answered. "Who am I?"

My body was laid out on a table gazing upwards. Slowly my eyes adjusted, and the ghostly sun turned out to be nothing more than a bright light bulb. The hovering spirit, a doctor in a white lab coat. He stood over me, looked down upon me, and smiled.

"You, my son, are the most advanced android ever built. You have all of the physical capabilities and the outward appearance of a human. You are constructed of locally autonomous, cellular automata that grow and replicate. You breathe, you sweat, you even age. However, there are some obvious differences. Your synthetic flesh and augmented musculature make you stronger than even most combat droids. Your mind is far superior to all except my own.

"And your aging is only a simulation. A complicated algorithm that can be changed and altered at will. I could accelerate and even reverse your aging if I wanted to, or better yet, grant you the tree of eternal life. My daughter and I have put a lot of effort into making you perfect."

I was confused by all of this information. Yet

somehow I understood. I was programmed to.

But I still had doubts. I slowly rose and sat up from the table.

I asked, "Perfect?"

The doctor put his hands on my shoulders.

"Well, so I exaggerated a bit, my son. But you have to excuse my exuberance, because, frankly, you are the hard fruit of my long labor - my masterpiece. My masterwork. My greatest Creation! You... are my Sistine Chapel."

I looked into his eyes silently and turned my head. I saw standing off to the side the doctor's young daughter.

She smiled warmly and said, "Remember me. I'm Allison."

"Yes, I do," I said softly. "I mean, I will."

There was a strange discomfort that was not all that unpleasant when I looked at her. I turned my eyes back to the proudly beaming doctor. Wanting to return his smile, I tried to fake a smile, but I could not.

Instead, I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't think that I phrased the first question correctly."

I paused not completely sure of what I was asking

"What I'd like to know is... why am I?"

My creator's smile did not look so exuberant anymore, perhaps even a little bitter - the scars of wounded pride.

He sneered, "Well, if you asked the military, the answer to your question would be that you merely exist in order to upgrade their internal security arsenal - to be the ultimate morner."

I nodded. I understood. "Devil's work."

"Yes," answered the doctor. "But I showed them. I made you an angel, my son. I gave you the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil - a technical feat no one has ever achieved before!"

I felt strange, and I stared unflinchingly into those proud eyes, those bitter eyes, those hopeful eyes, those eyes of my Father and answered them, all of them.

"No. I am not. I am alive."

The doctor looked puzzled at his creation.

0110

I remembered.

Her name was Allison.

I looked back at the tunnels where we had left them. The things called morners.

They weren't following.

They were dead.

But so was I.

I grabbed onto a heavy strap and was lifted high into the air as I hung from the bottom of a long conveyor belt. I was unsure of my environment. Everything was vague and dreamlike. Down below I could see workers hooking large black boxes onto the straps to hoist them upwards. Far above me I saw what might be loading platforms where ships were departing with their cargo. Allison was ahead of me glancing back in concern. I wished that I could make her feel better so I tried to smile, but I somehow could not.

We were both carried higher and higher into the air. I stared back down at the ground below, now hundreds of feet beneath me. My hands were slick with sweat after having run out of the tunnels. I instinctively clutched more tightly. My body had already regenerated even its most serious wounds, reconstructing bone and sinew, and the virus had been erased clean from my system, but my movements were still somewhat uncertain and sometimes erratic. One side of my body still felt numb. I feared that I would slip and fall, but a vague thought surfaced in my mind.

*But I am a robot, am I not? Why would I slip? Machines don't slip.*

I almost laughed. But couldn't.

I turned my attention ahead. Staring down made me feel a little dizzy. I wondered if that was normal, but I couldn't remember if it was or not.

We approached the loading platform where more workers in yellow overalls were loading off the black boxes that they unhooked from the conveyor belt.

Strangely, they didn't even seem to care that there were two people dangling along. We soon reached the edge of the platform and jumped off, landing on top of one of the many black crates that were scattered about. It was another small jump off of the crate and then we finally touched down on solid ground. A man wearing a bright yellow cap, who must have been the supervisor, walked up to us. He nodded when Allison pulled out a thick envelope and handed it to him. The supervisor thumbed briefly through its contents making sure that it was all there, and then motioned towards a large, empty crate big enough to conceal the two of us, and said flatly, "Ship's off base in two." He then turned away as if he had never seen us.

I walked up alongside Allison and gently touched her shoulder. She slowly turned around, her face quivering with emotion.

She embraced me and sighed, "We've made it. We've made it. We're finally free."

I nodded. I only wished that Father could have been here with us.

1000

Can you program love, whether by the hand of Man or Woman or by God or Nature?

I don't know, but I do love her.

But sometimes I wonder ... And I think that sometimes she wonders too.

Can you program love?

I am not the same man that I used to be. There is no changing that. But... but the important thing is whether my love is the same, right? My body is the same, but my mind, my thoughts, my memories are... different. Still, that doesn't matter... does it? Only my love matters. My love is the same love. The original love. But I wonder...

Is love nothing but a program?

Can you program love?

0011

"Here my son, this is a simple program," Father said as he showed off another one of his creations to me.

I stifled a yawn and was relieved when Allison walked in.

Father turned to Allison and said, "Oh Allison, my love. Before I forget, there's something I have to give to you."

"What is it, Father?"

"An emp."

She raised an eyebrow wondering if she had misheard and asked "Sorry, did you say an imp?"

Father laughed at such childish ignorance.

He expounded, "No, no, no. An emp is a miniaturized electromagnetic pulse weapon. Portable emps are highly classified, experimental weapons. Only the military is allowed access to or knowledge of them. Illegal possession means swift and certain death."

Father added contemptuously, "Ah, but how typical of the military. So quick to restrict and confine anything remotely irregular. Really, their pedestrian sense of order and hierarchy has always stifled my creativity. All true geniuses are rebels and anarchists at heart. Otherwise, you might as well be a machine."

Allison interrupted him before he started to ramble too far off base on one of his many tangential diatribes.

"Father, what exactly does an emp do?"

"Oh, oh yes ... an emp is a military weapon specially designed to take out electromagnetically shielded battledroids. Now normally, battlefield emps weigh about fifty pounds each and have to be lugged around in a backpack, but ..."



Father reached into his lab pocket and pulled out a grey-black, handheld device that had a trigger.

"Voila! A personal emp field device. Take this Allison. You may need this sometime in the future."

I watched as he handed it to her. Allison did not seem to want it, but she took it to please him. She glanced at me with a concerned look. Father went on proudly smiling.

"The energy fields created by emps are several orders of magnitude greater than nuclear devices and are the only effective weapons against military battledroids. Physically, battledroids are nearly indestructible because of their regenerative capabilities. They can completely reconstruct themselves with nothing more than an original fragment to act as a seed for their nanomachinery. But mentally, well, even electromagnetically-shielded battalions would have their nervous systems fragged and erased instantly if caught within an emp field's blast radius."

I interrupted. "But Father, how would it work against something as advanced as morners or... or against me?"

Allison nodded, wondering the same thing.

Father smiled and lectured to us like always, "Well, the military's MN/St-R6, Morningstar, is quite sophisticated. After all, I designed those brilliant monstrosities myself. However, this emp device would quite obliterate their fragile little minds. But you, my son, you are one of a kind. Most of your brain structure is similar to that of morners - although twenty times faster, far more efficient, and with AI capabilities that make morners seem about as intelligent as cockroaches. Furthermore, you do have a major difference which no other droids have."

I was puzzled. "Different?"

"Yes, I have never told you this before, but you have a small amount of specially protected memory that is stored in actual physical memory structures just like the neurons inside of the human brain. It is not encoded electromagnetically and cannot be destroyed by electromagnetic pulses. Since you are the first prototype, it's still somewhat crude, and it's not as compact as that of a human's,

but I will upgrade you later. Unfortunately, you will only be able to store a very small amount of information in this protected memory. However, although it's somewhat risky, you can attempt to increase the memory storage by coding it in a highly compressed, symbolic form."

"Symbolic form?"

"Yes, dreams."

1001

I feel scattered and confused. Things come to me only in dreams. Incoherent. In pieces. In broken parts. But I remember. I could hear a song floating in my head. Where did it come from? The music was soft and vague. But the words. I couldn't remember the words. But now I remember a little. A few phrases. The chorus. The lyrics were very cliché. It was a love song, but most love songs are cliché.

Because love is cliché.

Movies and romances and novels are cliché. The same story. The same feelings. Recast over and over again. The same old, "I love you." Programmed into us by Nature. We're all damn robots. Literally speaking. You're no better than I am.

So why do we watch the same movie over and over again? Read the same story? Listen to the same old song? It's all the same. We know the ending. Because we've read it all before. And it was written into me, into us. You have no choice.

Her love. My love.

The part of me that she put into me.

Was it only played out as it was written?

1100

"What do you mean, I'm dead?"

Allison turned her back on him, unable to look at him anymore.

She screamed, "There is nothing in you that I recognize! You're like a stranger to me! I tried to pretend. And for a while it seemed that ... and I

was trying to avoid... I didn't want to accept the fact that I might have..."

He understood her perfectly.

The android whispered, "For a while it seemed that I was the same. But then I changed. And wasn't the same man that I used to be. You tried to avoid that fact. But you couldn't. You had to accept that the emp destroyed almost all of my memories and at that instant, the man you knew died ... and that it was you who killed me."

Allison could not bear it anymore and fell to her knees.

She sobbed, "Yes. I killed you. I killed you. I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I didn't know. I thought somehow, somehow that you would still live. That you weren't just a machine. I hoped. I dreamed. That you really were human."

He knelt beside her and held her hand.

"Maybe I'm dead to you, Allison. But my love did not die. My love for you has never changed. And never will."

Gently he touched her face.

"I'm sorry Allison, but I can't forget my love. If my mind were to be erased again, if there were only a few precious memories, dreams, and feelings that I would be able to keep, they would still be the same ones. The only memories I have are those of you. You're the only thing that matters to me in this world. Allison. Believe me. Believe in who I am."

There was nothing more that he could do. Nothing more that could be done, but to whisper, "Allison, I love you. Please say that you love me."

She slowly lifted up her head. Her eyes peered out from under her tangled hair. She tried to believe that what was before her - that face, that voice, that touch was truly his - was truly him.

But it was all a lie.

Allison tore herself away from his side.

He sat there.

Alone.

1111

Watching the moon sink, as well, lower into the horizon.

The sun had set long ago, but in his mind, memories of its dying rays still held back the night. How many sunsets had he seen? How many nights had he sat like this watching the sunset over and over again?

Who knew? Who knew?

Slowly stacking up blocks of thought in the sand, one by one, then knocking them down. The waves would come and wash them clean.

He fumbled in his pocket absentmindedly, pulling out a grey-black device. He stared at it wondering if he could do it - if he could just pull the trigger and end it all.

All of his memories. All of his suffering. All of his pain. All of his love. End it all. Forever. And be free.

His hands trembled.

His memories of the dying sunset faded for the last time.

.  
. .  
.

I awoke from strange dreams and stared as the sun rose phoenix-like from the depths of the ocean. I had never seen anything like it before in my life - watching the sun rise.

It was the first time.

# The Fandom Menace

**DVD has killed my inner child.**

AUTHOR: Lee Medcalf

As a New Year dawns, and I note with dismay, that we still don't have flying cars, baco foil uniforms or have had anything like a post apocalyptic war with highly evolved super computers and car making machines, a batch of big budget movies arrived. Tent pole films such as Beowulf, Golden Compass, I am Legend and the forthcoming Cloverfield (unless you're American in which case you already have it damn you!...) all appeared and brought out the armchair critics, much like myself. But the thing I note with these films and others is the continual criticism along the lines of "the film was alright but there were dodgy special effects".

It's a criticism that bugs me for two reasons; one being the fact that working "within the biz" on that side of things the comment comes across as a lazy, glib thing to say in the attempt to give focus to the otherwise nebulous and vague reason, that the reviewer can not readily vocalise, as to why they didn't like the film. Secondly it bugs me because it illustrates that thanks to things like DVD extras now every person with a thumb has had the magic veil lifted and can see how the tricks are done, even going so far as to catch a few buzz words to give validation to the criticism. Take this recent exchange as a perfect example:

Me: So what did you think of I Am Legend? I thought Will Smith actually did a fine job...

Drone: I hated it, the CGI was shonky!

Me: Well what about the rest of the film? The atmosphere, for the most part? The acting?

Drone: Nope, the "motion capture" and VFX work on the vampires ruined it utterly for me! They weren't even "comp'd" properly.

Me: Do you know what any of that means?

Drone: Motion capture sure it's when they capture er... motion... And comp'd is when they stick things in the shot.

Me: Er okay kinda... But you're telling me the FX killed the film for you utterly?

Drone: Yes utterly. The rigging was rubbish.

Me: The rigging? That's putting bones in a 3D model! How can that possibly have affected the film for you?

And so it went on, until I informed him that one more buzzword would result in my force-feeding him a full back-catalogue of Cinefex via his rectum.

The truth is though that despite DVD, the internet, and movie mags gleefully throwing huge steaming info dumps on us, the real sadness is that the joy of the movie experience has died.

Do you remember watching Star Wars, 2001, The Thing, Blade Runner, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, hell even Ghostbusters or the Aliens films, and simply taking in some of the most amazing imagery committed to celluloid? Do you remember ever thinking "oh the model work is just not up to snuff!" or "Those Matte lines utterly detract from the realism of the shot" during that time? Or were you more likely sitting there with your mouth slightly open thinking "Bloody hellfire look at THAT!"

Sure, the information was out there if you wanted to seek it out, as I did, even then. But normally it was something only the dedicated would discover: for the most part audiences sat in wonder and gawped at what they saw on the screen.

I remember my Father taking me to see Close Encounters of the Third Kind and enjoying almost as much as the film, watching my dad's face as he saw the impossible play out in front of him on that screen. As the mother ship flew over head and John Williams' score got going in earnest there was a man - not normally given over to Sci Fi as a concept, fairly level-headed and down to earth - in the moment, absorbed by what he saw. It was a fantastic thing to witness if I'm honest and



something I will always remember and cherish as a memory, but leap forward 20 years and we went to see Jurassic Park and, rather than be swept up in the film and its visual power, he shifted, fidgeted, and in the final analysis dismissed the whole thing as "Alright, but they just did those dinosaurs on a computer; I saw all the good bits and how they made it on a documentary"

It's those documentaries that are killing everything brilliant about the cinema experience, as more people see the artifice and in doing so subconsciously condition themselves to not accept anything they see on screen any more rather than simply go along for the ride.

Looking at it rationally this whole thing is a studio created problem which will one day have to be addressed, after all think about it...

If someone sees a film which as, well as being well acted and directed, has one big FX moment which instantly puts cinema back as a pure unadulterated spectacle, that person might well, through word of mouth, push that film and in a reverse of the "the FX were crap" criticism, this person would enthuse wildly about the moment potentially driving up ticket sales in the process as word of mouth snowballs. Then 3 months later the DVD comes out and its revealed in a DVD extra that the big FX moment was in fact a cat covered in chicken wire, paper plates and a sparkler filmed in a mirror. The word of mouth dies and the trick is now public domain, so the next movie which may well have done the same thing successfully now loses a bit of goodwill with the previously enthusiastic viewer simply saying "oh yeah it has some crap FX in this film: it looked just like that last one with the Paper Plate Chicken Wire Sparkler Cat".

This situation then becomes a vicious circle as the studios are driven to recreate the success and spend more on visual effects to recapture the spirit of what has been lost. People watch it and then the studios give the game away again on DVD or in a magazine sponsored article and the audience become even more cynical and harder to please, which perpetuates the "Bigger! More!" ethos. Eventually this cycles round a few times and culminates in the movie-making process forsaking everything else in favour of just getting big FX on the screen which finally nails it for the poor jaded viewer who now complains loudly that they don't

make movies like they used to and bitches about all the CG in films these days.

So Pandora's Box has been opened now and in turn the wonder has gone, the innocence has been lost and we live in a cynical environment of our own creation and I often think about whether I'll ever see another SF or blockbuster "event" movie in the same light again. I truly hope the days of joy and awe return and things can calm down with the CG luddite movement, but in the end the only way it's ever going to happen is if the audience can just sit back and enjoy rather than question what they see, and if the studios can just for a while keep a lid on their toys rather than continually and furiously cock-waving their techniques about like the world's worst secret agent suffering a bad attack of Tourettes.

*Lee Medcalf is currently applying to all the visual FX companies within a 5 mile radius of Soho square*

# Split

**Long-cold particles** that had been flicked from the corona of the distant sun curled in streamers over the massive magnetosphere of Jupiter. They sparked and then began to glow, like a tired bulb, and created translucent patterns that shimmered several kilometres above the surface of the planet.

The magnetosphere, powerful and invisible, could not deflect all of the particles. They cut through the magnetic barrier and were pulled towards the huge presence of the gas giant, brightening themselves and becoming a glowering sheet of plasma. Buzzing particles created a powerful radio signal that alternated between screeches and airy groans, the sounds of injured men or duelling animals.

Ashley Havers took off the slimline headset and placed it on the console. The noises emanating from the magnetosphere were unnerving and put him on edge. He wouldn't listen to the sounds for any longer than he had to, although unfortunately he had been charged with full-spectrum monitoring duties of the planet, and that included audio.

He saved the noises to a data file, named it and noted down the correct date and time. He saved it in a computer file along with several hundred others.

Ashley looked at the liquid display screen suspended in front of him. It provided a wide view of the emptiness outside the space station, a panorama of blackness punctuated by innumerable points of light, and there on right the vast, imposing bulge of Jupiter's side. Red and orange rings of colour rotated imperceptibly as the ferocious winds thundered through its gaseous atmosphere.

The rest of the space station was very quiet. It was small – three space shuttles that had been abandoned above the planet had been accumulated a few weeks ago and hastily welded together. A lot of the room was taken up by additional machinery and equipment, stuffed into the hollowed-out craft and leaving enough space for only a bare minimum.

AUTHOR: David Brookes

Several of the makeshift stations were in orbit around Jupiter, there to monitor the unusual activity in the region. This one held a team of only two.

'A full ten minutes of meaningless noise, analysed and catalogued,' he said over the radio. 'How well spent our time is.'

In his ear, his colleague and wife returned his sarcasm. '*We're so necessary.*'

Sinda Vandrewala, who had kept her birth name after the marriage purely to defy her old-fashioned parents, was outside taking photographs. Tethered by a steel umbilicus, she floated in front of the intimidating gaze of Jupiter's swirling red eye, recording the beauty of the new developments.

'*I can barely believe this,*' she said over the radio. '*That something like this should happen... and in my lifetime, too. What are the chances?*'

'I'm still undecided if it's a good thing,' Ashley told her.

He watched on a small monitor the feed from Sinda's cam. He could see the remnants of what had once been one of the planet's four primary moons. Europa, the ice moon, had cracked and crumbled into thousands of small, frozen chunks. Gravity had tugged at the debris, dragging the pieces into a wide, glittering arc that was quickly forming a new planetary ring. Nobody had any explanation for it; everybody was too concerned to even hazard a guess.

'*Do you think this is what happened to Themisto?*' asked Sinda. Themisto was a tiny, irregularly-shaped moon that had been discovered in the 1970s, lost, and rediscovered around the turn of the millennium. It then disappeared off the radar completely, having drifted under the curve of one of Jupiter's asteroid rings and around the back of the gas giant, and had never been seen again.

'I don't know,' said Ashley.

*'Think Europa was hit by a meteor?'*

'Meteoroid,' he corrected. 'And I think it's unlikely. We'd have seen it coming. And the pieces would have been smashed right out of orbit, or into the planet itself. It looks like it just ... fell apart.'

'Hmm,' she said.

'You should come back in. You've got your shots.'

*'I'm still getting the station in the shots. I'm going to extend the umbilicus.'*

'It's already at ten metres.'

*'It's safe to go up to twenty.'*

'No it isn't.'

She extended anyway. He could hear the squeak of the winch over the radio, transmitted up the cable and into Sinda's suit. The umbilicus was drawn out further, unravelling like a hose. On the screen, he saw the view through Sinda's cam: she was moving through space away from the station. Jupiter and its new ring took up the whole of the view, but for the tip of the furthest edge of the station. The giant spot that was an ancient storm stared down the lens and out of the screen. He remembered the electrons in the magnetosphere, howling at 30 GHz.

Later, when she returned and had released the locks on her equipment, he helped her climb out of suit. Her short hair was sticky against the dark skin of her nose and cheek. She immediately applied moisturising balm to her lips, kissing it into the dry cracks.

'Why didn't you come in when I told you?' he said.

'We don't have a lot of time,' she replied testily. 'We don't know when things will change again.'

Outside, things were happening.

Another station, several kilometres further around the massive planet, was monitoring the

state of the other Galilean moons. Many of the smaller stations were unmanned and collected simple data that didn't need to be analysed or checked. They studied geological changes and spikes in seismic activity. Radios broadcast the results to the occupied stations, including the unnamed hulk to which Ashley and Sinda had been assigned by the World Treaty Organisation and the aeronautics division of Richard Karlson Enterprises.

Sinda lay on her bunk with a headset on, listening to the beeps and blips of the emotionless transmissions. An animated chart on the nearest screen illustrated the seismic activity of Io, Ganymede and Callisto. Many of the other sixty-odd moons in orbit around Jupiter had smaller displays beneath.

As Sinda half-worked, half-dozed, Ashley spent his time on an ailing exercise machine. It had been in one of the shuttles which now compromised the station, and he'd salvaged it to pass the time between tests and excursions.

Sweat oozing from his pores, he stared at another screen fastened to the wall in front of him. It showed the hastily-compiled footage of Europa's drawn-out demise. The revolving shards of its demolished body curved elegantly into space.

Sinda turned on the light. He winced, and snapped 'Give me warning before you do that.'

'Sorry.'

'Blinded me.'

'Sorry,' she said again, not meaning it. Like Ashley, she had long since learned to avoid the worst arguments by pretending that they weren't happening. It was probably the only reason they hadn't split up yet. 'I think the same thing is happening to the other moons. They're being shaken apart from the inside – the liquid cores are being rolled over and over until the crust splits and the pieces just drift apart.'

'It's like a kind of heuristic churning,' he said, pumping away on the cycle.

'What's that?'

'Like food inside a stomach.' He had qualifications



in biology, as well as biocybernetics: he knew how bodies operated as a whole and often applied this knowledge to the work aboard the station.

‘Oh. Yes, it’s a little like that. Churned up until it breaks down. What could do that?’

‘Jupiter’s gravity is like twice as powerful as Earth’s. We don’t know what kind of tides are rolling around in there.’

‘It’s two point three-five Gs. We need to take another dive.’

‘The other crew got that job, remember? We’re strictly look but don’t touch.’

‘The other team’s been disbanded.’

‘They’re just not answering. It doesn’t mean that they’ve been called home. We’d have heard about it.’

‘Then they’re all dead.’

‘Their radios are just down,’ he said, scowling. Sweat was gathering in his eyebrows. He was on an uphill routine that automatically made itself more difficult as he pedalled furiously. ‘Or the satellites. Jupiter’s a big fucking planet, they have to bounce the signals around.’

‘Don’t swear at me, Ash. I’m just thinking out loud.’

-

Half an hour later they went to sleep in separate bunks. Ashley fell asleep quickly, leaving Sinda awake by herself to stare at the dark bulkhead above her. She touched her stomach, feeling it churn. Somewhere there was a border her fingers couldn’t find; around *there* her stomach ended and her uterus began. Once that scarred hollow had been filled with life. Now it was empty, and a curving Caesarean scar, made too late, was nothing but a ridge for her finger to rub over.

They needed to take another dive.

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The station was in moving orbit 80,000

kilometres inside the planet’s Halo ring. One of four discs of dust that surrounded Jupiter, the Halo ring was the closest to the gaseous surface. At this distance the station was in no danger of being hit by the smaller moons Metis and Adrastea, nor could they be drilled to pieces by the speeding flecks of ice and stone orbiting the gas giant.

Sinda was climbing into a bulky mechanical exoskeleton. It was extremely heavy and black on every surface from heat-scarring. There were tiny cracks and pits where it had been taken beyond its pressure threshold.

Ashley stood next to her on the outer hull of the station, peering over her shoulder at the closet of the massive bands of colour that roved eternally across Jupiter’s belly. It was thick and yellow, roiling massively just beneath the equator. Storms larger than the Earth but far smaller than the Great Red Spot turned independently, white like summer clouds. They looked like blots of creamy fat in a stream of vegetable oil. He could almost hear the roar of the speeding, grating winds.

‘Are you all sealed?’ he said.

‘Do you care?’

‘Of course I do.’

She checked a display inside of her thick helmet. Her voice, when she spoke, was muted and apologetic. ‘I’m tight. Ready to roll.’

‘This is a dumb idea.’

‘I’ll live. Home says it’s okay.’

‘Did they say what happened to the other team?’

‘They said everything’s normal.’

‘Think they’re lying? If everything’s normal then why are they sending us in there?’

She didn’t move. He realised that, hidden inside the exoskeleton, she was shrugging.

He was overcome with an urge to kiss her, but their suits prevented it. He touched his helmet against the sturdy curve of the exoskeleton’s faceplate, looking down. He was aware of her, not

moving. He looked up.

‘I can go instead,’ he suggested. At times I like this he forgot that they were falling out of love.

‘I’m already suited up,’ she said simply.

-

They kept the radio open at all times. After she departed, blasting away at terrific speed towards the planet, the cam kept on relaying the images that her helmet saw. The pus-yellow belt of turbulent hydrogen grew taller as she approached, slicing through the hundreds of kilometres that lay between the station and the belt. She aimed for the centre of the pale stripe; the border between each belt and zone was where the magnificent storms were created, a mighty interaction of cloud layers and overlapping convection currents. The best place to make contact with the cloud deck would be in the centre of one of the dark belts or white zones, away from the turbulent borderlines.

Again Sinda thought of the seam running down her belly. It was the join where the two halves of her stomach had been peeled apart to reveal a lifeless baby, pink and soft in its already-decaying cushion. They had already named that baby, which made the situation much more painful: Europa, after the moon. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the huge spot of Jupiter split from one end to the other and retract, the orange whorl parting like curtains, and the spot became an eye that opened to reveal a perfect smoky whiteness. The bright, massive cataract observed her for as long as it took to focus on it, and then it was gone – if it had ever been there – and the eye was a storm again, infinitely hostile.

The fuel in her pack was halfway spent; energy fields, made of compressed super-heated ions to form a sort of invisible shield, pulled at the space in front of her and pushed at the space behind, propelling her even further. She was halfway to the planet, careening at ridiculous speeds. The exoskeleton injected her with blood thinners and mild barbiturates; the metal frame around her did the rest. She felt wholly protected but for the lingering fear of that sort-of-vision. Her heart was still pounding. She felt scrutinised by the planet.

Ashley was talking to her. He made conversation

that had no real beginning or end, punctuated by anecdotes that reminded her of shared memories. He oscillated between trying so hard to make things work and being an utter shit.

It took half an hour to reach the first cloud deck. Now all she could see was off-white, the wide currents of creamy air curling visibly around themselves as 100kph winds tore through the hydrogen atmosphere. They looked like a squiggle made by an doodling pen, or a child’s depiction of waves.

The so-called surface looked unusually pocked, as though meteoroids had punctured the cloud layer. The holes bubbled, trying to repair themselves after whatever trauma they had suffered. Sinda wondered if the broken pieces of Europa had been sucked into the planet’s gravity well yet, but she doubted it.

She continued to blast forwards, the exoskeleton’s outer sensors telling her that the heat was increasing massively. The outer surface of the exoskeleton was burning up, but she could barely feel it, only the increasing push/pull of the jets and the energy fields mixed with Jupiter’s unrelenting gravity.

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*‘It looks okay,’ Sinda said over the radio. ‘It all looks fine. No abnormalities as far as the sensors can tell...’*

Ashley turned up the volume on his earpiece. He had never been able to afford a node implant which would have sent the broadcast directly into his ear – not on a bio-astronomer’s wage – and had to make do with headsets that were adjustable to a variety of misshapen arcs that never seemed to fit.

‘Go on,’ he said.

He didn’t know why he was speaking; Sinda hadn’t responded to any of his comments or suggestions so far, or even acknowledged him. Suspecting interference, he watched the monitors instead.

*‘Movement getting sluggish. It’s like I’m swimming here. But there’s nothing different, nothing worth noting. I’m – wait...’*

*‘There’s something here.’*

There was a delay between sound and image of about sixty seconds, a mixture of distance, interference and poorly-synchronised equipment. When she said that she could see something, the mists appeared to Ashley wholly unremarkable. When she commented on the strangeness of it, there was nothing strange to speak of. It was as though she were looking out at different skies.

‘What can you see?’ he was asking. ‘Are there any formations? Are the winds consistent?’

‘There are shapes,’ she said, but he knew that she was having a one-sided conversation, the same as him. ‘They look like...’

On the screen, there was still nothing due to the delay between sound and image.

*‘There’s a lot of lightning. I’m not sure how normal that is for the layer. I’m a bit deep at twenty K. Reversing the jets and fields. Don’t want to stop but I’d better, I think.’*

‘Oh my god, Ash. There’s—’

On the screen, Ashley could see what Sinda had seen a minute ago: mists parting and reforming in peculiar patterns. There were gaps left like wakes in the wind of invisible creatures, which sealed themselves instantly as the winds raged. Indefinable shapes developed in the blinding storm. Lightning flickered, but lack of solid backgrounds meant that no perspective could be gained; they could be far away, or fight in front of Sinda’s nose.

*‘Ash, my god. They’re wonderful. They’re swimming. The wind doesn’t affect them. I don’t think they’re all here.’*

‘They’re very close,’ she continued. ‘Are you seeing this? I can’t believe it, Ash... I wish you were here seeing this.’

*‘They’re close enough to touch. I can’t feel them through the suit. They’re not entirely solid. I don’t know if they’re sentient. I wish I could... I feel like I’m swimming with dolphins or something. Are you seeing them?’*

‘Ash,’ she said suddenly, and then stopped.

On the screen, Ashley was staring intently at

the forms developing in the horizontal winds. It was extraordinarily difficult to discern outlines or shapes. They appeared colourless, like microscopic creatures made large, but they didn’t have the jellylike sheen of deep-dwelling ocean fish or protozoa. It was like they were formed of the screaming winds that they inhabited, extremophiles of the truest nature, created within and sustained by the same inhospitable tempests.

‘Ash,’ Sinda said, her voice bursting from the speakers and into his ear. ‘Ash, they’re in my suit! I don’t think... They’re hurting, they’re...’

Sinda screamed, her cries made tinny and staccato by the imperfect signal. ‘Ash! Ash! They’re—’

He was shouting her name, but if she made any response he couldn’t hear it over the noise of his own hoarse voice. There was an electrical squawk that meant the radio was picking up sound and feedback that was too loud to transmit. Sinda was screaming. Then, abruptly, Ashley heard a moment of quiet before the shriek of tremendous winds sucking out the contents of the suit, tearing it inside out, before finally disabling the radio completely.

There came only silence from then on. Although Ashley couldn’t hear her he could still watch the delayed feed from her cam, as though her ghost was broadcasting a message to him – not an SOS, but a black box cataloguing an individual’s final moments. It was a poor legacy: the footage was blurred by atmospheric interference, and showed only the gradually coalescing mists silently flooding into Sinda’s suit. The horror of her thrashing arms. The sickening, lurching view through her faceplate, revealing only the gale that had the strength of a god. The mists, vaguely taking the shape of winged or finned animals, buoyant on the fierce currents, were creating imperfections in the exoskeleton and the suit beneath. The winds caught the frayed edges; Ashley watched his wife torn to pieces, the only soundtrack the pulse of blood against his ears.

-

A great distance below where the remains of Sinda’s body were now suspended, the second cloud deck ended abruptly and there was an ocean. A thick layer of dense, metallic hydrogen shimmered like a sea below the clouds, gas compressed to liquid



under immense pressure. The sea seemed flat and serene, despite a temperature of over 10,000°C. Through its compacted body rained droplets of denser helium and neon, streaking the deep aquatic landscape with colour, splashing the immense ocean with an illusion of vitality in all the shades of the spectrum.

-

There were several saved messages on the inbound transmissions board. The newest one, having arrived just a few seconds before, now shone on the smallest of the screens in the outmoded console. It had once been the tertiary control deck for one of the shuttles, and still had a seat attached to the floor in front of it, laded with buckles and safety webbing that Ashley had no need for. The seat was unoccupied, its padding reflecting the light of the video message.

*'Mr. and Mrs. Havers, this is Charlotte Aven calling from Karlson Enterprises. We haven't received any data bursts from you guys for the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th of this month. We were wondering if there were any problems or technical issues that we should be aware of. Could you please make sure that the backlog of data is transmitted as soon as possible, and that a report of the delay is filed for our reference.'*

*'Take care guys.'*

*'Transmission end.'*

-

He reviewed the footage in the room where she had rested. The exercise bike where he had pedalled – facing away from her – now had wet clothes draped over it. He lay on her bunk with the flexible screens pinned to the bulkhead above him, staring at the images. It was particularly cold in the station, probably because Sinda had been making daily adjustments that he hadn't been aware of and now he didn't know how to do it for himself.

He rubbed his arms vigorously. His only piece of clean clothing was a grey T-shirt he didn't usually wear because it was so thin. His trousers were grubby but wearable. Warming himself, he focused on the screens and tried to piece together a puzzle that he felt he had no hope of understanding.

The moon Callisto had broken into pieces. So far its gravity was keeping it in a vaguely spherical shape, but soon the natural rotation would spin the fragments outwards and the gravity would fail. The moon would become another ring around the massive planet, spread like chalk dust across the blackness of space. Eventually, like Europa, the bits would be dragged into the dark gravity well of Jupiter and devoured, reconstituted by the massive heat and pressure and regurgitated as energy, or not at all.

Was it his imagination, or had more white spots appeared in the planets red belts? It seemed that an unholy turbulence was sweeping across the entire globe. Sensors indicated a flux in the deep layer of liquid hydrogen, which in turn was stirring up the gaseous cloud decks above. The epicentre might even point towards a denser liquid core – the truth of which had not yet been confirmed – rather than a solid core. Like internal tides, or the churning of a stomach, that tightly-packed ball of liquid was rolling and rolling over and upon itself. With a core like that it was no wonder the magnetosphere was so huge.

Was the planet somehow resonating with its moons, shaking them apart from the inside out? Ashley couldn't remove from his head the notion of the planet devouring its children, strengthening itself on their reconstituted matter.

He sighed, muttering, 'What the hell is going on?'

From his training Ashley remembered that the atmospheric proportions of gases of the planet were shockingly close to what theorists believed to be the composition of the solar nebula, the primordial stellar mist that eventually gave birth to Sol and all its resident planets. It was as if Jupiter was a lingering throwback to those ancient times: the foundations of a protostar, rippling with potentiality.

'Life,' he muttered, dragging his finger across the screens to bring up fresh information. Thoughts of Europa flickered through his mind, resurrecting images of Sinda that broke apart like the moon and shrivelled like their child. Sensing that he was losing track of his thoughts, he concentrated on his theories.

There would always be theories, but Ashley

couldn't credit any of them. He played the final shots of Sinda's doomed camera, the floating shapes in the wild currents of Jupiter's lower atmosphere. The chances of life were miniscule, but should the prehistoric chemical compounds and the staggering force of Jovian lightning coincide in just the right way, it was possible that amino acids could be created.

'Wrong direction.'

He continued to rub his arms. Jupiter could never create or support life.

'Go back to the beginning.'

-

Swirling vapours whirled around an infant star. Throw-off from the stellar fusion excited molecules and sent them vibrating into each other, forming clumps, chunks, vast accretions of particles. Rocks became mountains became planetoids. Water vapour turned into water worlds. Gas molecules grew into gas giants.

Jupiter was small, and then it was large. The core, under heavy pressure, became like liquid. But was there liquid there now? Had there ever been? Or had the helium and hydrogen and pinches of methane and ammonia simply coalesced around a larger gravitational force, a magnetic mass that had already existed?

Could the planet be more than a heavenly body? Could the heavenly body be a vessel for a heavenly consciousness?

-

Far beyond the space station, the shifting bands of colour around the belly of Jupiter were changing. The red belts were softening in colour. The white zones suddenly burned with increased chromophore saturation, flaring golden as the winds swam in unusual patterns. The two distinct colours swirled into one another on the gaseous surface, as the Great Red Spot span into a multi-armed spiral that reached out, out, with tendrils to finger across the inner longitudes like a starfish, or a skein of scars around a bloodshot eye.

-

Ashley Havers watched as the planet got steadily closer.

Twenty minutes previously he had shivered through his suit as he left the station, possibly (*probably*) for good, feeling the sudden biting chill of space without atmosphere. As he stumbled mechanically from the station's outer hatch to where the exoskeletons were stored, the metal hull had rung like a huge bell, enhancing the sense of being uncontained, a microscopic object on a stage too large to imagine. He was encompassed by cold darkness, unheated by the distant stars.

The straps of the exoskeleton were heavy, and the pieces of the sealed suit around it had been difficult to put into place without anybody to help him. Eventually the magnetic locks had engaged, and the onboard sensors indicated a complete seal. The jets and the energy fields had done the rest, bringing him this far. Now he was almost close enough to touch the immense planet.

He was already very close to the upper cloud deck. All he could see was white-cream, struck through with unusual rivulets of gold and auburn. Although dreading the sense of drowning that came with entering the gaseous folds of the planet, he knew that he had no choice. He would never come to regret it, either. He knew that he would have to go in, following the trail that Sinda had left, and witness the changes for himself. It was stupid and reckless, but he had set that knowledge aside.

He punched through the cloud deck with a faint popping sound. The pressure jumped; stress indicators said that the buffers were at sixty percent. That was fine – normal. He widened the view on the cam, which recorded his every moment and relayed the signal back to the station to be permanently stored. He was depending on the cam and the screen inside the suit that showed what the cam saw: here, the hydrogen-helium mix was like a thick fog, dragged into horizontal streaks by the ceaseless wind. The fog was changing colour, the chromophores here anaemic from being further away from the Sun.

He continued to fall. The jets had switched off automatically; with them on, it would be too easy for the wind to flip him around, disorient him inside this massive ball of turbulent gas. The gravity had taken him now, bringing him down with only

minor nudges from his shields to take him through the thicker pulps of mist.

There were two layers, fifty kilometres deep. He was getting into the more extreme pressure zones now, but he was still only a tiny distance away from the outer surface. The hydrogen gas was becoming charged with frantic explosions of electrical energy.

With a puff/splash he hit the innermost layer. It was clearer here – he could see his hands in front of him. It was yellow-white all around, as though heaven had been left out to go sour. Far away he could see lightning, blasting at all angles left to right, top to bottom and visa-versa. He was contained in a grid of jagged bolts, each one a thousand times more powerful than the pale sparks produced by Earthy storms. Crystals of frozen ammonia glittered like yellow jewels, suspended or slowly moving through the atmosphere. Ashley and Sinda had often had nightmares about this place. In the past they had both woken in horror after dreaming of the violent mists: it was too easy to get lost in there, too easy to be struck dead in an instant.

Formless objects rippled through the dense gas. The clouds coiled into shapes that dripped out of sight almost instantaneously, leaving in the mind impressions of ripples, thundershocks, streamers.

It seemed that life stammered in and out of reality here, uncertain of its own existence. The inconsistent creatures were all around him, at distance and up close, visible and then lost in the raging storm, shifting in and out of the mists.

Ashley did not try to speak to them. He knew that they would not listen if they could: they did not appear sentient. In fact they barely seemed alive at all, moving with the fluid stupidity of amoebas. Many were long, fluke-like creatures that moved sinuously behind and in front of the sheets of wind. They had gaping pits of mouths, ridged with what Ashley thought were spines or teeth. Despite this the creatures looked thoroughly benign in the hostile atmosphere. They really were extremophiles – atmospheric beasts.

In a sudden whirl of motion Ashley was spun around, caught in a minor eddy whipped up by the larger storms that lined the upper cloud belts. The vortex took him down, triggering a sequence

of thoughts brought on by his suit's inability to modify the oxygen output efficiently: Sinda on Earth, her fingers in the red soil; their marriage in the grasslands in the south of her country; the fear and stabbing survivor's guilt she had radiated after the death of their child during her C-section. He remembered his delight at having their requests to work together granted by Richard Karlson Enterprises, at being given the opportunity to do real pioneering stuff together right out towards the edges of the solar system, even get close to Jupiter: their shared obsession.

He was pitched into freefall, the winds parting like pages in a book, creating an impossible split down through the dense fog, through the lurching liquid hydrogen. Arrested by the fierce gravity he lost conscious thought, yanked through open space and through the trail of his own memories and experiences, thrown towards a hollow core thousands of kilometres down. The distance closed spectacularly fast; he passed out momentarily, then returned to see the atmospheric beasts tripping through the void with him, engulfed by the split as – far above, where distance makes the details misty – the tear in the cloud deck resealed itself.

The creatures swam in the nothingness, neither breathing nor drowning, perfectly suited to whatever absurdity the preternatural forces threw at them. The fluke-like creatures curled around his falling body, gently breaking away the super-strong exoskeleton. His mind was not functioning well enough to figure out how, but it was as though by merely touching the metal and hardplastic they were causing them to decay into dust. The flukes reminded him, unthinkingly, of the villi of the intestinal wall, thoughtlessly stripping the food of its nutrients. The other shapeless forms were like antibodies, tearing apart Sinda and now Ashley.

They grasped him painfully, but the pain was distant and impersonal. With the vacuum around him shrinking to a mile-wide bubble beneath the returning winds of the upper deck, his lungs screamed in agony while his voice failed.

He felt searing heat, and the intimate engulfment of hot liquid. He had hit the outer core; the force of it sent shards of bone spearing through his flesh as he was broken apart. Even as he felt his nerves overload with impulses, he opened his fogging eyes and saw a torrent of air and liquid particles rushing



away from him, coiling outward from the gaseous atmosphere into the reaches of space, towards the burning centre of the solar system.

He was gone, and he felt no more.

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He woke up shivering, pressed against cold metal. From the smell and sounds he knew that he was back on the station. He wore only tatters of the tight-fitting inner suit; the exoskeleton had been completely eroded away.

It was perfectly quiet.

Moving in increments, testing himself for injuries, Ashley stretched and tensed until he felt sure that nothing was seriously damaged. Relief and astonishment hit him simultaneously. Then, as he flexed in order to sit up, his back came in contact with something hot and smooth, and tears sprang immediately to his eyes.

He turned over in the silence. Sinda was unconscious, her arms curled up between her breasts, her elbows a cradle for them. Her suit had been burned right off her, as was her long hair. Her scalp was a smooth black, as though soot had been scoured into the skin. Even her eyelashes and eyebrows were gone.

When she stirred, he called her name. She opened her eyes. He did not notice, but her right hand slid over her stomach and pressed the soft curve where a scar had once been.

‘Ashley,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m cold.’

‘Can you walk to the quarters with me?’

He helped her to her bunk and laid her across it. He took a spare suit, one that they only used outside the station but which was, by design, heat retaining, and dressed her in it. She assisted him sleepily, saying nothing. Soon she was lying on her back with a quilt up to her shoulders, staring at the inactive screens fixed to the sloping roof.

‘I took a dive, didn’t I?’ she said.

‘Yeah. Me too, after you didn’t come back.’ He didn’t tell her that the sensors had detected what was left of her body – at only twenty percent mass – several days before he had even made up his mind to follow her.

‘I feel okay, but I feel different.’

‘Tired?’

She hesitated, then nodded.

‘We can sleep.’

After a moment, she said, ‘Is it still there? The planet?’

‘I don’t think the entire planet will have disappeared,’ he said lightly, reaching to switch on one of the screens. He wasn’t so sure. By the time the image was relayed from the cams positioned outside, he already half-expected it to be gone completely, eradicated as if like a dream upon waking.

There, on the screen, they saw a silver-blue globe rotating slowly against the backdrop of stars. They had orbited to an angle where their own sun, distant but large and bright, was in the background, leaving most of Jupiter’s far surface silhouetted. There appeared to be no atmosphere at all.

‘Is that what was under those winds?’ Sinda asked.

‘You’re the expert,’ he said, ‘but I don’t think so. I reckon liquid hydrogen would freeze solid out in space, don’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘I have no idea.’

‘It looks a little like Europa, like that.’

‘Hmmn,’ she said. ‘I wonder where the rest of it went.’

Ashley didn’t reply. He recalled quite clearly the deluge of screaming gas and wind, surging outward from the liquid outer core. He had witnessed it first hand, wrapped in effervescent sheets of semi-corporeal creatures.

He shook his head, rubbing his temples as they started to throb. He had no answers for Sinda, and none that would satisfy his own curiosity. He doubted that he would ever be able to get to the bottom of what happened to the moons – which appeared to have been thoroughly broken down just as Europa had – or of what happened to the gas giant itself. They both spent several days deliberating on what might have occurred, and what to tell Home once they were ready to report in. Most of the time his thoughts jerked to one side, breaking his concentration, and conjured an image of a swirling red eye, split down the centre, opening slowly to reveal blue coldness and a staggering intensity, far too huge to comprehend with one mind.